An Examination of Hong Kong's Emerging Pet Economy and Its Implications for Environmental Hygiene, Food and Beverage Business, and Public Transportation

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ABSTRACT

This article talks about recent policy changes in Hong Kong that are meant to help the pet economy by making it easier for pets to go to restaurants and ride public transport. The study looks at how these changes have affected environmental hygiene, the food and drink industry, and public transportation in a complicated way by using government documents, legislative drafts, media coverage, and public testimony from stakeholders. The findings indicate that while the policies address demographic trends (9.4% of households possess roughly 400,000 cats and dogs), their execution reveals a conflict between economic objectives and public health priorities. The government's phased strategy, which promotes voluntary adoption and gives businesses the freedom to operate as they see fit, is a tentative attempt to find a middle ground between these two competing interests. Still, there are still problems that need to be worked out, such as who is responsible for hygiene-related incidents, how these changes will affect customers without pets, and whether the current infrastructure can handle them. The article says that Hong Kong's pet-friendly policies will only work if they change the rules and make people more aware of how to live peacefully with pets. Utilising Matland's ambiguity-conflict model of policy implementation and Freeman's stakeholder theory, the analysis delineates implementation deficiencies that differentiate Hong Kong's approach from pet-friendly frameworks in Singapore, Tokyo, and London.

Keywords: economic goals, environmental hygiene, pet economy, pet-friendly policies, public health, policy implementation, stakeholder analysis

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong's Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu made a big change to the rules in his Policy Address (Hong Kong Government, 2025). He said that restaurant owners could ask customers to bring their dogs into their businesses. This was done at the same time as efforts to make it easier for pets to use public transport. The announcement changed the Food Business Regulation (Cap. 132X) rules that had kept dogs out of food business since 1994. The only exceptions were guide dogs and other dogs with legal rights. People who broke this rule used to have to pay fines of up to HK$10,000 or spend three months in jail.

The government mostly talked about how this change in policy would be good for the economy. Lee used government data to show that over 240,000 homes in Hong Kong have dogs or cats, and that there are more than 400,000 pets in total. This group of people is a big market for pet food, health care, insurance, grooming, and training services. The Environment and Ecology Bureau agreed with this point of view by saying that the project could open new business opportunities in the food and drink industry.

Still, there are a lot of tough problems that need to be solved, in addition to the economic ones. These include concerns about environmental cleanliness, public health, social acceptance, and the implementation of pet-friendly policies (Geil, 2018) in a densely populated urban area. This article addresses three research enquiries. First, what are the most important rules and procedures that Hong Kong's new pet-friendly rules for public transport and restaurants will have? Second, what do pet owners, restaurant owners, people who do not own pets, and policymakers think are the pros and cons of the policies? Third, what issues are likely to arise when these policies transition from announcement to enforcement, and what measures can be taken to mitigate these issues? The article enhances the emerging literature on multispecies urbanism in high-density Asian cities by presenting the first comprehensive analysis of Hong Kong's pet economy policy reforms for 2025–2026.

There are nine parts to the analysis. After this introduction, Section 2 looks at the relevant literature, explains the theoretical framework, and looks at the demographic factors that are causing policy changes. Part 3 talks about the way. Section 4 talks about how the rules will change to make restaurants more welcoming to pets. Transportation rules have changed, as discussed in Section 5. Section 6 talks about how stakeholders give feedback and how they disagree with each other. Section 7 talks about problems with implementation, using Singapore, Tokyo, and London as examples. Section 8 talks about the study's limits, and Section 9 ends with a conclusion and practical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The expanding pet economy (Lu et al., 2022), driven by evolving social trends and the inclination of individuals to regard pets as family members (Irvine & Cilia, 2017), has emerged as a significant economic sector with extensive implications. Recent research, including studies by Arluke, Sanders, and Irvine (2022), characterises this transition as a transformation from perceiving pets as possessions to regarding them as family members, thereby generating novel consumer demands. This review compiles current research regarding the effects of this change on three primary domains: environmental hygiene, the food and beverage (F&B) sector, and public transportation.

There is a clear conflict between having pets and keeping cities clean when it comes to environmental hygiene. Haldeman and Schmidt (2022) say that pet waste is becoming a bigger problem in public places. It pollutes urban watersheds and can spread diseases from animals to people. Researchers recommend enhanced infrastructure and initiatives such as pet waste composting programs to mitigate these environmental impacts (Martin et al., 2021), as current municipal management is inadequate.

The F&B industry is also changing by making more spaces that are good for pets. Wunderlich et al. (2021) write about the growing number of cafes and restaurants that let pets in. This shows how businesses try to meet the needs of pet owners while still following strict health rules. The biggest problem is finding a way to let pets in while keeping hygiene standards high to avoid contamination and keep food safe (Wong & Wong, 2026). This has led to new ideas, like having separate dining areas for pets and special menu items. Zhang, Liu, and Shao (2025) investigated the influence of pet-owning restaurant patrons' emotional responses on their dining experiences, revealing that positive emotions markedly enhance intentions to return.

Bringing pets on public transport is a complicated issue. Kent, Mulley, and Stevens (2020) say that transit agencies have trouble with unclear rules about pets, which leads to fights between pet owners and other passengers over things like safety, allergies, and fair use of space. The research indicates the necessity for transit systems to create pet-friendly alternatives that cater to pet owners while ensuring quality service for all.

The current literature, although enlightening, reveals three major deficiencies. First, most of the research on pet-friendly policies comes from Western, low-density settings (e.g., Kent, Mulley & Stevens, 2020, on Australia; Kellershohn & Habib, 2024, on North America), with insufficient focus on high-density Asian cities where spatial limitations significantly impact the practicality of pet access. Second, literature often looks at pet-friendly policies in isolation, like restaurants or transportation, instead of looking at them as parts of a larger pet economy. Third, there haven't been many studies that investigate the gap between policy announcements and enforcement on the street, especially in regulatory settings where formal rules don't keep up with political statements. This article addresses these gaps by focusing on Hong Kong, which has a very high population density, and by looking at how policies are put into action in real time, from announcement to pilot programs to proposed changes to the law. Yu and Yang's (2025) study on multispecies urbanism and the emergence of dog parks in Shanghai serves as a valuable comparative reference, indicating that Asian megacities are cultivating unique strategies for human-animal coexistence that diverge from Western paradigms.

2.1 The Rise of Pet Ownership in Hong Kong

This article is informed by two synergistic theoretical frameworks: policy implementation theory and stakeholder theory.

(a) Theory of Policy Implementation

Matland's (1995) ambiguity-conflict model of policy implementation serves as an effective framework for examining Hong Kong's pet-friendly initiatives. Matland posits that implementation outcomes are influenced by the levels of ambiguity (uncertainty regarding policy objectives and methods) and conflict (disagreement among stakeholders concerning policy direction). Hong Kong's pet-friendly policy is somewhat unclear (the government has set rules for things like leash length, carrier size, and fees, but it has not made it clear who is responsible for hygiene problems or how to enforce the rules) and somewhat controversial (pet owners generally support the policy, non-pet owners are worried about hygiene, and restaurant owners are split). The ambiguity-conflict model posits that in these circumstances, implementation will be profoundly context-dependent, resulting in substantial variability in outcomes among different restaurants and modes of transportation. The analysis sections below put this theoretical prediction to the test.

(b) Theory of Stakeholders

Stakeholder theory (Kivits & Sawang, 2021) asserts that organisations and policies must equilibrate the interests of all groups that can influence or are influenced by their actions. In Hong Kong's pet economy, key stakeholders are pet owners (who get convenience and welfare benefits), non-pet-owning citizens (who may feel less comfortable or see hygiene risks), restaurant owners (who don't know what their costs and benefits will be), transport authorities (who have to keep service quality and safety high), government regulators (who have to enforce rules without making things too hard), and animal welfare advocates (who want more protections). Stakeholder theory posits that enduring policy outcomes necessitate the identification and resolution of the legitimate concerns of each group, rather than the optimisation of benefits for a singular constituency.

2.2 The Rise of Pet Ownership in Hong Kong

It looks like government policy changes are a response to changes in how people live and spend money in Hong Kong. According to census data used in policy reports, about 241,900 households (9.4% of the total) have cats and dogs as pets (Census and Statistics Department, 2019). The total number of pets is more than 400,000.

These numbers show that there are changes happening in society and demographics. Angela Chan Nga-chi, president of the Hong Kong Pet Trade Association, says that pet owners used to mostly buy basic pet food, but now they prefer more expensive items. She says that more pet owners see their pets as family members (McConnell et al., 2019) and that they are putting more effort into improving their pets' quality of life, as shown by changing consumer habits.

This change has a big effect on the economy. According to Chan, the pet food industry makes more than HK$6 billion a year, and people spend about HK$800 million a year on services related to pets. Pet owners usually spend at least HK$2,000 a month on their pets, and some also pay for insurance that costs around HK$1,000 a month. These numbers show that the "pet economy" is a big part of consumer spending, especially in the retail, veterinary care, grooming, and, increasingly, food and drink and transportation industries.

But the 9.4% number needs to be looked at very carefully. First, it only counts households with cats or dogs; it doesn't count households with other pets like fish, birds, hamsters, or reptiles. This means that the total number of pet owners is a little higher. Second, the number is from 2019 (Census and Statistics Department, 2019); there is no public data that is more recent, and pet ownership may have gone up during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been seen in other places (Morgan et al., 2020). Third, and most importantly for policy design, the 9.4% number is for households, not people. Households with pets may have more than one person who benefits from having a pet, while households without pets may have people who don't care about or support pet-friendly policies. The binary framing of "9.4% versus 90.6%" simplifies public opinion too much. Nonetheless, the number is a good reminder that pet owners are a small group of people, and policies that put costs or perceived risks on the majority without clear benefits may face long-term opposition.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study utilises qualitative document analysis methodology, augmented by a secondary analysis of stakeholder testimonies as documented in public media and governmental records. The research design is exploratory and descriptive, suitable for analysing a policy initiative that had not been fully executed at the time of writing (the legislative amendments were set for submission to the Legislative Council in the first quarter of 2026). No primary data collection, including original surveys, interviews, or observations, was performed. As a result, this study ought to be regarded as a policy scoping review rather than an impact evaluation.

3.2 Document Selection Criteria

Documents were included if they met four criteria: (a) they were published or released between September 2025 (the date of the Policy Address) and March 2026; (b) they were directly related to pet-friendly policies for restaurants or public transport in Hong Kong; (c) they were produced by a government body (like the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department or the MTR Corporation), a legislative source (like LegCo records or member statements), or a recognised media outlet that is Opinion blogs, social media posts, and unverifiable anonymous sources were not allowed.

3.3 Data Sources

We carefully looked at the following sources:

• Government documents: Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (2025; 2026), Census and Statistics Department (2019), MTR Corporation press releases (2025; 2025a).

• Sources of law: the Policy Address 2025 and statements from LegCo members as reported in the Hong Kong Commercial Daily (2026).

• Coverage in the media: Oriental Daily News (2026), Hong Kong Commercial Daily (2026) and Hong Kong Free Press (2025).

• Testimony from industry stakeholders: The above media sources, including quotes from Angela Chan (Hong Kong Pet Trade Association), Ricky Tam (Uluru Cafe owner), Simon Wong (Hong Kong Federation of Restaurants and Related Trades), and an unnamed Chairman of the Association for Hong Kong Catering Services Management, all reported on this.

3.4 Analytical Framework

We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis to look at documents and quotes from stakeholders. The six phases are: getting to know the data, coding it for the first time, coming up with themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and writing them up. The initial codes were deduced from the research questions, which focused on regulatory features, stakeholder perceptions, and implementation challenges. Emergent codes were discerned inductively via iterative reading. The first author did the coding by hand, and no inter-coder reliability was calculated, which is a known limitation.

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR PET-FRIENDLY RESTAURANTS

4.1 Legislative Amendments and Implementation Timeline

The government has suggested changes to the Food Business Regulation (Cap. 132X) that would make it legal for dogs to enter food businesses. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (2026) says that the implementation plan is based on four main ideas: giving restaurant owners and customers the choice; putting safety of people and animals first while also keeping food safe and the environment clean; lowering compliance costs for the industry; and moving slowly through small steps.

The legislative schedule says that the changes will be sent to the Legislative Council in the first quarter of 2026. The new rules will first apply to a small group of 500 to 1,000 restaurants, which is about 3 to 5% of all the food and drink businesses in Hong Kong.

4.2 Operational Requirements and Restrictions

The rules say what restaurants that want to take part must do (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, 2025). You must always keep your dog on a leash that is no longer than 1.5 meters long, held securely by an adult, or tied to something that will not move. Dogs are not allowed in areas where food is being prepared. Also, dogs that are known to be dangerous or are known to be fighting dogs are not allowed in the program at all.

Firstly, only restaurants with a floor area of more than 20 square meters are allowed to take place. This requirement was put in place because stakeholders were worried that smaller restaurant spaces could lead to dogs blocking main walkways, making it harder for staff to move around while serving food and increasing the chances of accidentally encountering the animals. The government thought about

giving priority to restaurants with outdoor seating or those in pet-friendly shopping malls, but in the end, they chose to stick with a single policy for everyone to follow to keep things fair and easy to manage.

The 20 square metre minimum floor area requirement addresses stakeholders' concerns about space congestion, but it has big effects on how things are distributed. According to data from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (2025), about 40% of licensed restaurants in Hong Kong have floor areas of less than 20 square meters. Most of these are small, independently owned businesses in older neighbourhoods. Even if the owners of these businesses want to be part of the pet-friendly program, they are not allowed to be. So, the policy favours bigger chain restaurants and venues in newer commercial areas. This could mean that pet-friendly options are only available in wealthier areas, making it harder for pet owners to get to them in older, denser areas. The government's stated reason "to uphold fairness and maintain administrative simplicity" does not address this issue of fairness.

The program does not include hotpot and barbecue restaurants, even those that serve Japanese and Korean barbecue, because they are not safe. Businesses that take part must put up clear signs at their entrances so that customers can make informed choices about whether or not to go there.

4.3 Fee Structure and Administrative Process

Adding an endorsement to existing food business licenses will give them permission to allow dogs, so there won't be a need for a separate licensing process. This method is meant to make the application process easier and cheaper. The application fee for the first phase is HK$140, which is about US$18.

HK$140 is not a lot of money, but the criticism comes from the lack of transparency, the lack of a clear cost explanation, the possibility of future increases, and the strange incentive to break a system that was meant to make compliance easier. A truly simplified process would either be free or have a small, one-time fee (like HK$50–100) that is directly related to the costs of running the business.

TRANSPORTATION POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

5.1 Light Rail "Cat and Dog Together" Pilot Scheme

In addition to the restaurant project, transportation authorities have slowly made it easier for pets to ride public transit. The

MTR Corporation (2025) started the Cat and Dog Together pilot program on the Light Rail network in May 2025. This program lets people bring cats and dogs on weekends and holidays. The pilot was supposed to last two months, but it was extended to four months because the feedback was good.

By August 2025, more than 1,300 people had bought the Cat and Dog Together Pass they needed. The MTR Corporation's surveys showed that more than 95% of people who answered liked the program and appreciated the company's efforts to make the workplace more welcoming. There are a few things to keep in mind about this survey's results. The MTR Corporation has not made the survey tool, sample size, response rate, or sampling method public. It is likely that only people who had already paid HK$99 to bring their pet on Light Rail were able to take the survey. These people were Cat and Dog Together Pass holders. This group of people chose to be in it and probably has positive opinions about the policy. So, the survey can't be used to make generalisations about all Light Rail passengers, pet owners who didn't buy the pass, or passengers who didn't own pets but may have had problems and weren't surveyed. The number "over 95%" should be seen as a sign of how happy program participants are, not as a sign of how well the program is accepted by the public.

Animal welfare groups also noticed that more than 90% of pet owners followed the rules for boarding, and the animals stayed calm during the trip, living peacefully with other passengers. These results backed the program's move to permanent service starting in September 2025, but the limits on weekends and public holidays would still be in place (MTR Corporation, 2025a).

5.2 Regulatory Requirements for Pet Transport

The transportation policy lays out certain rules for people who own pets. Animals must be kept in carriers that keep all the cat or dog's body parts from being seen outside. The carriers must follow size rules, and the total size can't be bigger than 170 centimetres. You can't use pet strollers or carriers with wheels.

Owners must buy a monthly pass for HK$99, which lets them take one pet on each trip. You must get on and off through certain doors, and pets must stay at the back of the compartment. This rule only applies to the Light Rail system that runs through the northwestern New Territories, specifically in Tuen Mun, Yuen Long, and Tin Shui Wai.

People's attitudes toward dogs have more to do with their support for policy change than transportation-related issues. This means that transportation policymakers need to look at more than just transportation issues. Kent, Mulley, and Stevens (2020) determined that examining minor public transport policy modifications can promote a transition from private vehicle utilisation.

5.3 Expansion to Other Transport Modes

Light Rail is no longer the only way for pets to get around; there are now more options. In October 2024, KMB started a bus service that allowed pets. At first, it only ran on weekends, but by February 2026, it was running every day and had carried over 20,000 passengers since it started. Pets are now welcome on all of Sun Ferry's passenger routes. Public hospitals have begun letting pets visit patients in palliative care, which shows that more people are realising how good animals can be for people's health (Wunderlich et al., 2021).

Dog owners in Hong Kong want to travel with their pets very much, but they have a lot of trouble doing so because the available modes of transportation do not meet their needs. These problems, along with how pet owners feel about changes to the rules, can help us make public policies that are better for pets.

STAKEHOLDER RESPONSES AND TENSIONS

6.1 Pet Owner Perspectives

Most pet owners have liked the new policy. Miss Ng, who owns a two-year-old toy poodle and works at a pet salon, wants more restaurants to let pets in. She says that the only places that do now are mostly Western-style cafes with small outdoor areas that get crowded on weekends when many pet owners gather.

A passenger on the Light Rail pilot program with her dog Minos said it gives pet owners another way to travel. It lets her take her dog for walks and playtime in places that are farther away. Mr. Cheng, who has a corgi, also said that it was hard to take his pet out because the only options were taxis or private cars.

6.2 Restaurant Operator Experiences and Concerns

Operators who already offer services that are good for pets have found both good and bad things about doing so. Ricky Tam, who owns Uluru Cafe in Wan Chai, had a hard time balancing what customers wanted with the rules he had to follow. Tam got letters from Food and Environmental Hygiene Department officers saying that his licence could be suspended if dogs were allowed on the property, even though pets never caused any major problems (everyone liked pets, and they made the place lively and happy).

Tam had to stop regular customers from bringing their pets, even those who came all the way from Tuen Mun, after this. The effect was immediate: his sales fell by 20 to 30%. Tam said, "I don't know if the government is really trying to help small businesses like ours". His situation shows how different things are on the ground from what the government says. The Chief Executive may have said he supported businesses that allow pets, but the rules that were in place were still in place until the law changed.

People in the field have also talked about real concerns about how to make it work. The head of the Association for Hong Kong Catering Services Management asked an important question: who will pay to clean up after pets if they make a mess on carpeted floors? He also said that cleaning takes more time and might make other customers uncomfortable (Kellershohn & Habib, 2024), which could hurt the restaurant's reputation.

Simon Wong, who oversees the Hong Kong Federation of Restaurants and Related Trades, asked if pet owners spend enough money to make businesses willing to take the risk. He said that this new rule might even backfire by turning away customers who are allergic to dogs or just do not like them.

6.3 Non-Pet Owner Perspectives

People who do not have pets' opinions are an important part of the policy discussion, but they are often ignored. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department says that between 2021 and 2025, they got 1,781 complaints and took legal action against 17 businesses for letting dogs into restaurants. There were 1,366 complaints about dogs in restaurants between 2020 and 2024.

An editorial in the Oriental Daily News (2026) brought these issues to light by pointing out that the number of complaints shows that many people do not want pets in restaurants, mostly because they are worried about hygiene. People are often afraid that pets will go to the toilet in restaurants, leaving fur that could get on food. Some people say they won't go to any places that allow pets.

This is a tough problem for pet-friendly policies. They want to help about 9.4% of households, but they need to be put into place in a way that doesn't turn off the other 90.6%, many of whom are concerned about cleanliness and might stay away from places they think are dirty.

6.4 Legislative and Advocacy Perspectives

Lawmakers and people who care about animals have mostly liked the policy direction, but they have stressed the need to focus on how it will be put into action. Tam Chun-kwok, a member of the New Territories North Legislative Council, said he supports the plan for pet-friendly restaurants after meeting with officials from the Environment and Ecology Bureau. At the same time, he stressed the need to keep making animal welfare laws better, such as changes to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Ordinance (Hong Kong Commercial Daily, 2026).

Tam said that reports of animal abuse have gone up in the last few years, reaching a six-year high. He also said that dog poisoning is still a problem in New Territories North. He asked the government to speed up changes to the laws, make strict rules about exotic animals, and deal with the problem of stray animals at their source.

ANALYSIS OF IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

7.1 The Hygiene-Utility Trade-off

The main problem with the pet-friendly policy is that it is a trade-off between cleanliness and convenience. People share restaurants and public transport, so what one person does can change how other people feel. Pets, no matter how well trained, can be a problem in ways that people-only spaces don't usually have to deal with. For example, they might urinate or defecate, shed fur, cause problems with other animals or people, or make people with allergies or fears feel uneasy.

The government tries to control these risks by making rules that require leashes or carriers, keep pets away from areas where food is being prepared, and ban animals that are especially dangerous or unpredictable. But these rules cannot get rid of all the risks. Instead, they let businesses and pet owners deal with any problems that are still there on their own.

In addition to soiling and shedding fur, a more serious hygiene issue in food establishments is the possible spread of zoonotic diseases. The World Health Organization (2019) says that dogs and cats can carry germs like Salmonella, Campylobacter, Toxocara, and ringworm, which can spread to people through direct contact or surfaces that are dirty. International standards for letting animals into restaurants and other places that serve food are very different. The European Union's Regulation (EC) No 852/2004 (Council of the European Union, 2004) only allows living animals in food establishments under very strict conditions that keep them from getting sick. The United States Food Code, on the other hand, usually doesn't allow live animals in food establishments, except for service animals. Hong Kong's proposed framework doesn't directly address the risks of spreading pathogens. It requires leashes, keeps food preparation areas off-limits, and bans fighting breeds. There is no mention of better cleaning procedures, places to wash hands, or keeping pet dining areas separate from food service areas. There is a difference between what the government says is important, which is "maintaining food safety and environmental hygiene," and the rules that are being proposed right now.

When a pet soils a restaurant carpet, employers are unsure who should pay for cleaning it, which shows a clear gap in the rules we have now. Businesses have to make things up on the fly because current laws and rules don't make it clear who is responsible. Many businesses end up paying for the cleanup themselves because there aren't clear rules. This lack of clarity makes it harder for businesses to run smoothly and shows how important it is for restaurants to have clearer rules for cleaning up after pets.

7.2 The Challenge of Dual Markets

Restaurants that are thinking about joining the pet-friendly program have a tough decision to make. They want to get customers who have pets, but they might lose customers who don't have pets because some people might be worried about cleanliness or just not want to eat near animals. Simon Wong said that owners need to think about the chance that they won't make either group happy.

The dual markets challenge can be formally articulated in economic terms. Let P be the percentage of households that own pets (0.094) and N be the percentage of households that do not own pets (0.906). Let's say that a restaurant that allows pets gets a percentage *a* of pet-owning customers who would not have come otherwise but loses a percentage *b* of non-pet-owning customers who would have come otherwise. The restaurant needs to have $*a* \times P \geq *b* \times N$ to break even on customer volume. If you plug in $P = 0.094$ and $N = 0.906$, this becomes $*a* \geq 9.64*b*$. In other words, to keep the same number of customers, a restaurant needs to attract about 9.6 times as many pet owners as it loses non-pet owners. If a restaurant loses 5% of its customers who don't own pets ($*b* = 0.05$), it needs to get more than 48% of its customers who do own pets ($*a* = 0.482$) to break even. This is not likely to happen unless pet owners start going out to eat a lot more often or the restaurant is in a neighbourhood with a lot of pet owners. This analysis is necessarily simplified (it does not account for differences in spending per customer, cross-visitation patterns, or the possibility that some non-pet owners are indifferent or positive toward pets), but it illustrates the steep economic hill that pet-friendly restaurants must climb.

The government lets restaurants decide if they want to take part, but they must put up clear signs. This lets each business make a choice based on its own customers. Restaurants in places where there are a lot of pet owners or where the atmosphere is good for pet owners might think the benefits are worth the risk. Some people may think that bad things are worse than good things.

7.3 Infrastructure and Spatial Constraints

It is hard to make pet-friendly rules in Hong Kong because of how the city is laid out. The editorial in the Oriental Daily News (2026) said that most restaurants in the city are very close together because there isn't much land available. This makes it hard to tell if they are good for dogs. The government's choice to only include restaurants that are bigger than 20 square meters in the first phase solves this problem, but it also cuts down on the number of places that can take place. Smaller venues that might want to take part are not included, which could mean that pet-friendly options are more likely to be found in larger venues. Samantha Ng said this could lead to crowded weekends because a lot of pet owners go to the same few places.

Some lawmakers have suggested adding things like dog toilets and hand-washing stations to areas where pets are allowed. These changes could make things cleaner and better for both pet owners and other customers. But there hasn't been a clear plan made by the public yet to build these kinds of places.

7.4 The Cultural Dimension

One of the hardest things about making Hong Kong more pet-friendly is that it is not just about rules, but also about culture. Angela Chan said that both pet owners and the public need to learn how to treat animals and how to act around them. In many other countries, people who own pets often send them to train classes to learn basic social skills and make sure they clean up after them. These are basic responsibilities that owners must take seriously. People who do not like being around pets will be very upset if you do not do this.

Chan says that teaching people how to interact with animals should be a part of Hong Kong's civic education. This is because the city is moving toward a way of life where people and pets live close to each other. The Light Rail trial showed this cultural aspect, as surveys showed that more than 90% of pet owners followed the boarding rules and most pets stayed calm and well-behaved. This shows that shared spaces can work if there are clear rules and people are willing to follow them.

But restaurants are a different story. When you eat out, pets can move around more freely and sit closer to other customers. This is different from the Light Rail, where pets stay in carriers. For pet-friendly dining to work, people need to come up with some unwritten rules about when it's okay to bring pets, how to handle them, and what to do if something goes wrong. These norms are just starting to show up in Hong Kong right now.

7.5 Comparative Perspectives with Singapore, Tokyo, and London

Three other densely populated cities around the world can be compared to Hong Kong's pet-friendly policy.

(a) Singapore -- The Singaporean government allows dogs in some public housing flats, but only if the owner follows a strict set of rules that only allow them to have one small dog of a certain breed. Dogs can ride on public transport if they are in carriers that meet certain size requirements. There are no special pet passes or fees needed. Restaurants can apply for licenses that allow pets, but they need to have separate ventilation systems and areas for pets to eat. Singapore's approach is stricter than Hong Kong's, with clearer infrastructure needs but less room for businesses to be flexible.

(b) Tokyo -- Japan has a higher rate of pet ownership than Hong Kong (about 15% of households). Many train lines allow dogs without carriers if they are leashed and muzzled, but the rules aren't always followed. There are a lot of pet-friendly restaurants, but most of them only have outdoor seating or separate indoor rooms. Japan's most important new idea is that there is a strong cultural norm for pet training and manners, which is backed up by a lot of pet obedience schools. Angela Chan said that this cultural infrastructure is mostly missing in Hong Kong.

(c) London -- Without a carrier, Transport for London (TfL) lets dogs ride the Tube, buses, and trams for free. They must be on a leash. There are not many rules about restaurant policies, so each owner can make their own choices. London's approach is more relaxed than Hong Kong's, but it works in a city with fewer people and more outdoor dining spaces. Researchers say that the low number of complaints about pet-related hygiene problems is because of established norms of responsible ownership and effective street-cleaning systems.

This comparison shows that Hong Kong's approach, which is strict but has reasonable fees, clear rules for how things should work, and a slow rollout, is somewhere between Singapore's prescriptive model and London's permissive model. Hong Kong is different from both Singapore and Japan because it does not require pet training, have special infrastructure, or have better cleaning procedures. It is still an open question whether Hong Kong's less strict rules will be enough.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to recognise the study's limitations.

(a) Data accessibility -- The analysis is based only on documents that are available to the public and testimony from stakeholders that has been reported in the media. Internal government discussions, unpublished feasibility studies, and the perspectives of stakeholders who did not engage with the media are not documented. The MTR Corporation did not make all of the survey data on Light Rail passenger attitudes available, which made it hard to tell if the reported "over 95%" positive response figure was accurate.
(b) Time limits -- At the time of writing, the restaurant scheme had not yet started (changes to the law were planned for the first quarter of 2026). This article examines projected challenges and preliminary pilot results from the Light Rail initiative, rather than actual behavioural outcomes or hygiene incidents from restaurant implementation. After the scheme has been running for 6 to 12 months, more research will be needed to see how it works in the real world.
(c) Generalisability -- The results pertain exclusively to Hong Kong's densely populated and heavily regulated cultural environment. They might not apply to cities with fewer people, cities with different rules about pets, or cities where more or fewer people own pets.
(d) Representation of stakeholders -- The article includes testimony from pet owners, restaurant owners, industry association leaders, and policymakers. However, the voices of people who don't own pets are only heard through complaint statistics and media editorials. This group was not directly surveyed or interviewed. The article's portrayal of non-pet-owner attitudes should be regarded as provisional.
(e) Coding by one analyst -- The first author performed thematic analysis without verifying inter-coder reliability. This is fine for exploratory research, but it could lead to unconscious bias in how themes are created and understood.
(f) There is no way to measure the impact in numbers -- The article does not attempt to quantify the economic benefits or hygiene costs of pet-friendly policies because the necessary data, such as changes in restaurant revenues, complaint rates after implementation, and veterinary incident reports, are not yet available. Subsequent research ought to rectify this deficiency.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The growing pet economy in Hong Kong is a big test for the city's social policies. The government has slowly lifted long-standing bans on pets in restaurants and on public transport to deal with changing demographics and new business opportunities. This careful plan, which emphasises voluntary participation and gradual growth, shows that people are aware of the different interests at play.

This article has shown, though, that making changes to the rules isn't enough for successful implementation. There are many things that need to be addressed, such as who is responsible for pet-related accidents, how to serve different types of customers, the lack of infrastructure, and cultural attitudes toward living with animals. The government has more responsibilities than just changing laws. It also must make rules, help different groups work together, and teach people.

There are a few clear policy implications. First, clear rules for how to deal with incidents (like who is responsible for safety or hygiene issues) would make businesses safer. Second, putting money into pet-friendly infrastructure, especially in areas that are specifically for pets, could make things cleaner and better for everyone who uses them. Third, any changes to the rules should be followed by public education about how to care for pets responsibly and how to have good relationships with animals.

Ricky Tam's story, in which he was a business owner who had to deal with both customer demand and government enforcement, shows how important it is to have a coordinated implementation. People and businesses both get frustrated when policies are announced but rules have not caught up yet. So, even though the government's phased approach makes sense, it needs to be clear about the timelines and how things will change.

This article presents three novel contributions to the discourse on pet-friendly urban policy. First, it offers the inaugural systematic documentation of Hong Kong's 2025–2026 policy reforms, ensuring a preserved record of the policy design process for subsequent evaluative research. Second, it uses Matland's ambiguity-conflict model of policy implementation to look at the pet economy, showing how useful the model is for looking at situations where policy goals are somewhat unclear and there is some conflict between stakeholders. Third, it points out specific problems with implementation that make Hong Kong's approach different from more established pet-friendly

systems in Singapore, Tokyo, and London. These problems include a lack of clear rules for who is responsible for incidents, weak environmental hygiene protocols, and a lack of training for pet etiquette. These contributions are necessarily provisional, given the early stage of policy implementation, but they establish a baseline against which future outcomes can be measured.

Ultimately, success will not be quantified by the number of restaurants or transportation services that permit pets, but rather by Hong Kong's ability to establish a sustainable equilibrium for both pet owners and individuals who favour animal-free environments.

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