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Empowerment, transformation and the construction of ‘urban heritage’ in post-colonial Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT
In recent years, there have been many political and economic debates in Hong Kong, and heritage conservation has been used as a political and economic weapon by some members of the community. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews, this paper analyses how buildings of a small street built in the 1950s were constructed as ‘heritage’, and how a community heritage discourse was used by a group of local residents (Kiefang), university students and professionals to object to the urban renewal project led by the Hong Kong government. In this context, heritage was used to obtain political rights and to express anger against the increasing gap between the rich and poor of Hong Kong. Though the immediate objectives of this group were not achieved, the protest process empowered a group of local residents, and has marked the commencement of a politicized heritage conservation movement in post-colonial Hong Kong.

Introduction

The construction, participation and the role of ‘community’ in heritage studies have been widely debated (Waterton and Smith 2010), as have been the economic, political, social and cultural values that intersect with issues of ‘community’. While ‘community engagement’ and ‘empowerment’ have been viewed as part of ‘social inclusion’ strategies for social justice and equality, this process can have other consequences beyond the pursuit of equity. Based on a case study of how one ‘community’ construct itself and its ‘heritage’, this paper aims to add the current debate within community and heritage studies.

Located at the northern edge of the South China Sea, the current Hong Kong Special Administration Region (HKSAR hereafter) consists of the Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula, the New Territories, as well as more than 200 islands. The northern part of the Hong Kong Island being the political and economic centre of the whole region, the Hong Kong government offices are located here, as are the headquarters of international companies, shops selling luxury products and the most expensive mansions and houses. In addition, there are many small shops managed by local people in this area, and their business ranges from bakeries, butchering, printing, laundry to fashion accessories among others, are often owed by one person or by a family, and rely mainly on word-of-mouth for marketing. However, with the continuous rising cost of land, which leads to the substantially increased price of property leasing or purchasing, and the more severe competition from big companies, it has become more difficult for small businesses to survive in the Central and nearby districts.
Further, because the Hong Kong Island has been densely occupied since the nineteenth century, there are thousands of dilapidated buildings in need of repair, renovation and rebuilding in these districts. The task of urban renewal has been led by the government since the 1980s, and the current government agent for the task is the Urban Renewal Authority (URA hereafter), which was established in 2001. The objectives of the URA are to address the urban decay and improve the living conditions of local residents by urban renewal (HKURA 2011). Usually, when the URA decides to carry out a urban renewal project in a district, it purchases the dilapidated buildings from the property owners, pays the building occupants (either shop operators or residents) to move out. It will also help tenants who could not afford private housing, and who pass a means test, to settle in public houses, while it demolishes the old buildings and auctions the land to private property developers. The URA receives payments from the sale of the land and uses the money to carry out its next project. After purchasing the land, private property developers build new buildings and sell them on the private market for profit. In recent years, the URA has occasionally also demolished old buildings and built new dwellings itself.

This, prima facia, seems quite fair. In fact, similar strategies had been carried out for many years, either by government departments or by private property developers. The majority of the affected households, including residents and/or shop operators, gradually moved to other areas, some were willingly, others reluctantly. However, there are problems. First, the price of new dwellings in prosperous districts with better social and cultural facilities and infrastructure like the Central or the Wan Chai Districts are usually very high and beyond the reach of lower to middle income earners. For example, in 2004–2005, a new apartment in Wan Chai was sold for over HK$10,000 per square foot, so that a small apartment of about 500 square feet\(^1\) then costed more than five million Hong Kong dollars; yet the average salary for a new university graduate was then about HK$10,000–11,000 per month. After paying food, rent, transportation and other basic needs, there was very little money left for saving, and the possibility of buying one’s own property is quite low. For many members of the local community without a university degree, it is even more difficult for them to buy a new apartment in Wan Chai or nearby districts even after considering the money they may have received from selling their property to the URA.

The second issue is the loss of social networks. Many local workers, particularly part-time and casual workers, rely on the social networks they create in their original district to find jobs and survive. The operators of small business also rely on social networks and word of mouth to maintain their business, as they usually cannot afford to pay for media advertisements. Thus, moving to another district can cause significant negative impacts on the work and life of local people. As claimed by local interest groups, the government’s urban renewal strategy simply forces them to leave the street, even the original district, and to move to poorer districts with less social and cultural facilities. As ordinary citizens, they are unable to refuse this forced removal from a district that they had lived and worked for so many years.\(^2\) The Land Resumption Ordinance 1990, empowers the URA to force local residents to move out under an order issued by a district court, and allows for the land to be resumed by the government or its agent ‘for a public purpose’ (Department of Justice, HKSAR Government 1997).

This renewal strategy practised from the 1980s to the early 2000s, was described by local residents as a ‘tractor-style renewal’ that did not consider the local residents’ willingness and need to return to their original district to live and work; neither did it pay much attention to the preservation of historical buildings. It was primarily the efforts of a ‘concern group’, formed in 2002, that brought this practice to public scrutiny and that eventually made the URA adjust its urban renewal strategy to pay more attention to local community needs and the preservation of urban heritage in Hong Kong. The group consisted of local residents of a small street, I will call ‘Yee Dun Street’,\(^3\) and a few professionals who were concerned with this profit-oriented strategy. The Yee Dun Street campaign marked the beginning of the so-called ‘heritage conservation movement’, or ‘the movement of protecting local culture’, in post-colonial Hong Kong.
The Yee Dun Street and its community

Located in the Wan Chai District, which is the neighbouring district of Central and is often called ‘the supporting district of the Central’, Yee Dun Street is about 400 m long and about 10 m wide (Figure 1). Almost all the buildings on both sides of the street, before being demolished in 2007, were three to six storeys built in the 1950s; each allotment measured approximately 600–700 m². The ground floor of the buildings were occupied by shops including printing, grocery, dry cleaning, small restaurants or cafes, while the upper floors were residential apartments, many of which were occupied by the operators and/or owners of the small businesses on the ground floor.

This pattern of doing business downstairs and living upstairs within the same building or nearby building is very common in the historic districts of not only Hong Kong, but also South China and Southeast Asia. According to an informant whose family had lived and worked near Yee Dun Street for two generations, this pattern was very convenient. It saved her travelling time and troubles between her home and her shop; more importantly, when her children were young, she could look after her children while managing her business as her home and business were in the same building. Another informant bought two apartments on the upper floors above his small shop, one of which was occupied by his own family, another by his mother, so he could look after his aged mother as well as his own children while still managing his business.4

According to information gathered from 12 informants who used to live and work on Yee Dun Street, the majority of the local community did not have tertiary education, and had only finished primary or secondary school before joining the labour market. Among the 12 informants I interviewed, none of them had a university degree. Two of them had attended primary school only, and the rest had left secondary school at different levels. Many of them did not have a command of English and were not very familiar with computers. They identified themselves as Kiefang, a Cantonese word referring to ordinary unskilled lower to middle-income urban residents.

Although the unemployment rate in Hong Kong in the early twentieth-first century was around 3%, many members of the local community on or around Yee Dun Street were not able to find well-paid

Figure 1. The Yee Dun Street in 2005, the majority of shops were already closed. Today, all the shops have been demolished. Photo by Tracey Lu.
jobs. Some were workers in small businesses in the area, others were self-employed or had part-time or causal jobs. This phenomenon was mainly due to their lack of English efficiency and computer skills, and their age. Many members of the local community were aged 40 or above, most were in their 50s or 60s. Though still working, it was very hard for them to compete with the younger generations with university degrees in the labour market.

This middle-aged and relatively not well-educated community, on the other hand, had a very close social bond between its members, as one informant Mr Chen described:

The Yee Dun street is not very long, but it usually takes me more than half an hour to walk from the beginning of the street to my home (in the middle of it), because I talk to every neighbour on my way home. Here, everyone knows everyone.

In modern buildings, neighbours don’t know each other, and no one cares about his neighbours’ business, so the government has to employ social workers to look after the elders or the young with problems. It is not the case here! If an elder person is sick and has no family members to look after her or him, the Kiefang would cook soup or other food and send to him or her, and look after the person. If a housewife is too busy to go to the school to take her children home, her neighbour would do it for her. If a young person becomes problematic, like not going to school or learning bad things, the neighbours would immediately inform the parent, sometimes even lecture the kids directly. We don’t need the government to send social workers here. We can manage our own matters, because we are not new migrants, and we have been living here for decades, even for generations.5

This informant, as well as other informants, all emphasised that they were ‘locals’. They claimed that they were ‘Wan Chai ren’, which means ‘Wan Chai people’, and their lifestyle was a ‘Wan Chai culture’. When asked what distinguishes the ‘Wan Chai culture’ from the lifestyle of people of other districts in Hong Kong, they claimed firstly, that they were not new migrants from mainland China, as they had been living in Wan Chai for decades, even for more than one generation; whereas in other districts, particularly in the New Territories, many residents were identified as ‘new migrants’. Second, they made their living by running or working for small businesses, instead of being employed by big international companies. According to the informants, small businesses facilitate close cooperation between shop owners, and provides employment for local people, who do not have the skill and/or knowledge required by big and more ‘modern’ companies. Lastly, they had a much closer social bond between themselves, and cared more about their neighbours, than the ‘new migrants’.6

Apparently, they have constructed a clear social boundary between themselves and the ‘new migrants’ recently arriving in Hong Kong from mainland China by emphasising their ‘localness’, although they could not deny that either themselves, or their parents or great parents, were migrants from mainland China too. The construction of this social boundary illustrates one of the social phenomena in post-colonial Hong Kong, which is the gap between the ‘Hongkongers’ and people from mainland China. There are various economic, social and political causal factors behind this social phenomenon (Lu 2009), and the construction of the social boundary by local community members demonstrates (again) the conflict between mainland China and Hong Kong people in post-colonial Hong Kong, though both are of Chinese ethnicity.

The construction and denial of an ‘urban heritage’ discourse

The formation of the ‘Yee Dun street concern group’ was triggered by an urban renewal project in Wan Chai, Hong Kong Island. According to my informants,7 the urban renewal project was initiated in 1997, and the URA began to implement the project in 2002. Occupants of about 1600 households and small shops in and near Yee Dun Street were directly affected by the project. The shops and/or residential apartments were purchased by the URA; the purchasing price per square feet was similar to shops and apartments built seven years ago in the same district. All residents or shop operators who did not own properties in the affected area had to move out, with some payments from the URA to subsidise their move. Though the majority of the affected households eventually moved out, although about 20 residents8 refused to obey, and formed a ‘Yee Dun Street concerned group’9 in 2003 to fight
against the URA’s renewal project, mainly by constructing a community heritage discourse, arguing that the buildings in the Yee Dun street were historical buildings that should be preserved (Figure 2).

So, who are the members and why they object the project? The concern group held a weekly evening meeting between 2004 and 2005. I participated in almost all the weekly meetings at that time. According to my observations, there were about 10–15 core members who regularly attended the meeting and participated in the decision-making process. Among the core members, there was a ‘co-ordinator’ Mrs Lim, who was a middle-aged lady owning and managing a small shop inherited from her father in a street next to Yee Dun Street. The renewal project meant that she would have to close her shop and move out of this area. She completed secondary school and had a very good command of English. Another core-member was Ms Yeung, she was in her 50s and used to run a very tiny business of her own. This occupied a little platform at the turning corner of a flight of stairs inside one of the old buildings on Yee Dun Street, she sold her own hand-made accessories to make a living. She did not have to pay rent for her ‘stair-shop’, and did a bit of cleaning as a ‘payment in kind’, because she had lived in the street for so long and the neighbours were willing to help her. The renewal project meant that she would have to close her business too, and it would be impossible for her to re-establish a similar business elsewhere, for other people would not be so kind to let her enjoy a free stair corner to do her business. Since the building she used to work in was purchased by the URA, she had to live on casual jobs. She was a very active member of the group. Another four to five core-members of the group were men in their 40s–60s, and were workers or apartment owners, whose life and work were all severely affected by the renewal project. A young man in his 30s also came to the meeting often. He was a professional photographer and made significant contributions to the publication of several pamphlets about Yee Dun Street to promote the buildings of the street as ‘urban heritage’.

Though many members of the local community were not formally ‘well-educated’, there were well-educated members in the ‘concern group’. These were people who were not economically affected by the renewal project, but played a significant role in the whole campaign against the URA renewal
project, and who contributed to the construction of an ‘urban heritage’ discourse, as they had more cultural capital and social capital than the local residents (Bourdieu 1986). There were two professional urban designers, who designed a renewal proposal that would keep the old buildings and allow the local community to stay on. Details of this proposal are discussed below. Two social workers, one male and one female, both were in their 20s and held university degrees, they were also core-members of the group. The young female social worker told me that she was originally employed by the URA to help the local residents move out, but she found out that there was too much what she called unfairness in the whole process. Thus, she quit the URA job and became a member of the concern group to help the Kiefangs to fight against ‘social unfairness’.

In the summer of 2004, a few teachers and students of two universities in Hong Kong also attended the weekly meeting and contributed to the campaign. A postgraduate student from a university in the UK also came to the meetings in order to write his thesis. These persons, however, were not ‘permanent’ members of the concern group, as they did not regularly participate in the group’s activities after the summer of 2006, when the Yee Dun case was closed.

There was also an elderly woman in her 60s, who only attended a few meetings in the summer of 2004, as she eventually had to move to another district. At the last meeting, she was in tears, saying that she and her husband had worked so hard to buy a small apartment on Yee Dun Street in the 1950s. They had paid off the home loan in the following decades, thinking that they would live there forever; yet because of the renewal project, her family had to move to another district with less social facilities. She was upset because she had been living in Wan Chai for decades, yet she had to move to a strange area when she was old; ‘I could not find my way if I depart Wan Chai’ she said. She was also upset because she was no longer able to see her long-time neighbours.

She was not the only one feeling sad because of the loss of community connection. When I was interviewing a shop owner in 2004, the latter had a visitor who was her neighbour when they both were doing business on Yee Dun Street. The visitor had moved to another district because of the URA renewal project, and spent more than an hour travelling to Wan Chai, just for the purpose of chatting with his ex-neighbour. In summary, some members of the concern group objected to the renewal project because they suffered economic loss, others joined the group because of their ideology of social justice and fairness, or because their own academic needs of doing research.

It is not to say that every one of the local community affected by the renewal project was unhappy. According to another informant, the URA interviewed people who had been low-income tenants on Yee Dun Street, had settled in public houses in other districts as a result of the renewal project, and claimed that they were happy with the new settlement. The concern group did not claim that they represented everyone. They just argued that people affected by the government’s renewal project should be given a choice, those who wanted to go could go, but those who wanted to stay should also be able to stay. They were angry because they had not been given such a choice, which they considered as a core value of democracy. They were also angry because the rich would benefit at the cost of the poor.

Mr Gu, a man in his 60s, who had worked in a place where people play mah-jong before the commencement of the URA renewal project, said the following with anger:

Wan Chai was not like this before. It was not the government, but us, the Wan Chai people, work very hard to make Wan Chai very prosperous. Now the government comes to kick us out, and if we refuse to do so, we will be taken to the court. Look at who will benefit? The property developers! We have made Wan Chai one of the best districts in Hong Kong and yet we are forced to leave, and the property developers come to get big profits!

According to informants, most agreed that a renewal project was necessary, as the existing buildings, nearly 50 years old, needed to be repaired; but they wanted to be able to return to the street that they had been working and living on for decades. They wanted ‘a shop for a shop, and an apartment for an apartment’, that is, if someone owned a shop or an apartment before the commencement of the renewal project, he or she should be able to regain the ownership of the shop or the apartment of similar size after the completion of the project. Of course, a new shop or a new apartment would be more expensive than the old ones, and they said that they were willing to pay the difference. This proposal, however, was rejected by the URA. They claimed that it would be very difficult to sell the
land to property developers with such a condition. Much irritated, members of the concern group decided to find another way to fight against the URA, this other way should also be able to attract public support. They then discovered the usefulness of heritage:

We know that if we just say that we have not received sufficient payments from the URA, like people of the other districts [affected by the renewal project] did, then the public will say that we are just too greedy. But if we say that these are old buildings that should not be demolished, that is another matter.\(^{15}\)

The idea of arguing that the buildings of Ye Dun Street were ‘urban heritage’ was born before the author joined the concern group in 2004. The informants could only say that this was their collective idea. However, the full discourse of ‘urban heritage’ was elaborated and constructed in the summer of 2004, and the author took part in the construction process. It was argued that the 3–6 storey buildings of Ye Dun Street (Figure 1) were properties of urban heritage, and should not be demolished because firstly, they represented typical dwellings both for business and residential purposes that are commonly found in South China (including Hong Kong and Macao) and areas in Southeast Asia where ethnic Chinese live and do their business. This architectural style is called Tang lou (meaning ‘buildings of Chinese’, though it is not really a traditional Chinese dwelling) in Hong Kong and Macao. In Hong Kong, many Tang lou have been demolished recently, yet the buildings of Ye Dun Street were relatively well-preserved and formed a street-scape of Tang lou in a historical district of Hong Kong. Thus, the buildings had historical significance, as they were material evidence of the architectural history and vernacular buildings in South China and Hong Kong.

Secondly, unlike shops in big shopping malls, the buildings of Ye Dun Street had high ceilings and solid framework, which were suitable for shops doing printing or metal works, as the machines could be installed inside the shops. Usually the front part of the shops was used for selling the products, and the rear part was used for production. This pattern of doing manufacturing and sale at the same spot was very important for the local small businesses, not only because it saved time and cost of traveling between the sites of manufacturing and the sales, but also because the clients could witness the manufacturing process and be assured that the products were ‘made in Hong Kong’. In recent years, many small businesses had faced the competition of similar products made in mainland China with cheaper labour and material costs. One important strategy for the survival of local small business was to emphasise the quality of products as locally made. The point that the buildings had been used for local and small shops of the printing industry for decades, and had witnessed the history of this local industry was used to define their historical significance.

Third, the buildings were used not only by local community members to live and operate their small businesses, but also facilitated close social bonds between occupants of the buildings. For example, many small printing businesses would need casual labour when they had urgent orders, and they could employ instantly and easily local residents to work for them. Printing businesses also often cooperated with each other. As small businesses, not every shop had all the raw materials and/or techniques required, so when one shop received an order, the manager could request help from other shops nearby in terms of either materials and/or techniques. This cooperation was very crucial for the survival of small businesses, and it was only feasible in buildings like those at Ye Dun Street, where shops with raw materials, machines and skilled workers, were so close to each other.

Fourth, as claimed by the 12 informants, the business operators and residents of buildings of Ye Dun and nearby streets had formed a close community network. These buildings were material carriers of a unique culture in Wan Chai, a culture in which small and local businesses survive and flourish, and neighbours helped each other. The demolishing of these buildings, and the construction of modern shopping malls and densely occupied modern residential skyscrapers, would mean that this unique urban culture would not survive. Many small and local shops would have to be closed or suffer lost business, the aged and less well-educated local people would lose their jobs, and the local community network which had been built based on economic and social cooperation over decades and which had obtained a collective identity as Wan Chai ren would disappear. Consequently, the work and life of the local residents would be negatively affected.
As a historical district, Wan Chai was characterised by its small and local businesses, which had been operated by Kiefangs living there for decades. They have been cooperating in doing business, and have built an economic and social network in the district. This is a unique culture in historical Hong Kong, and it was argued should have been protected and safeguarded in order to maintain the survival of local the economy and the cultural diversity of Hong Kong. The idea of maintaining cultural diversity through heritage preservation was proposed by UNESCO, and it was considered that this should be implemented in Hong Kong.16

It was based upon this ‘community heritage discourse’ that the two professional urban planners designed a renewal proposal, which was called a ‘dumbbell’ proposal. The key points of the proposal were to ‘conserve’ and repair buildings in the middle of the street, and to demolish only buildings at the two ends of the street to build modern shops and residential skyscrapers. By doing so, owners and/or tenants of the shops and residential apartments could return to the street if they wanted to, when the renewal project was completed.

The ‘dumbbell’ proposal was trying to strike a balance between the need of building new dwellings and the need of the local community to return to their original district. The proposal was submitted to the URA in 2005, as the first community proposal of urban renewal in Hong Kong, and the concern group had done a lot of survey work and recording in order to address the legal and administrative queries and requirements of the department of urban planning of the HKSAR government. This work had ranged from whether the proposal would increase local traffic, to the effects of the new buildings upon nearby buildings, to the management of rubbish in the area, and so forth.

Unfortunately, the proposal was rejected by the URA, because the buildings were not urban heritage. The argument was that, first, the buildings had been built at the end of the 1950 and were thus not ‘old’ enough. Second, similar buildings could be found in many other places in Hong Kong; and, third, the buildings lacked architectural beauty and historic significance (meaning that the buildings were not associated with historically important events or persons). As the buildings were not deemed to be ‘heritage’, it would be very expensive to repair and keep some of the existing buildings, the ‘dumbbell’ proposal was rejected.17 Ironically, however, the URA adopted the proposal’s ‘dumbbell’ idea and decided to build some 3–4 storey buildings similar to the original buildings in the middle of the street, and only build skyscrapers at the two ends of the street. Of course, as the new shops and apartments would be very expensive, it was still impossible for the Kiefangs to return to Yee Dun Street after the renewal project.

The concern group then, in November 2006, took their dumbbell proposal to the Town Planning Appeal Board, which was (and is) a committee within the Town Planning Board (TPB for short hereafter) of the HKSAR. Established under the ‘Town Planning Ordinance in 1991 as a statutory body of the HKSAR government responsible for town planning, and with the Planning Department of the HKSAR government as its executive arm (Town Planning Board 2012), the TPB had (and still has) a superior power on town planning, including urban renewal. Thus, the concern group was hoping that the Appeal Committee of the UPB would accept their dumbbell proposal and direct the URA to execute it.

At a formal meeting in November 2006, both the representatives of the URA and the Yee Dun Street Concern Group presented their own renewal proposal to the Urban Planning Appeal Board. The Board had the power to accept or reject the proposals, and their decision was final. Not very surprisingly, the dumbbell proposal was finally rejected at the meeting, primarily based on the denial of the buildings as ‘urban heritage’. Consequently, all the buildings in Yee Dun Street and nearby areas were demolished in 2007, a private property developer bought the land, and new buildings were built and sold at the private property market.

**Failure or success? Empowerment and individual and social transformation**

Prim facia, the campaign launched by the Yee Dun Concern Group against the URA failed, as the group’s dumbbell proposal was rejected, and the group’s objective of keeping the original buildings at
the street and returning to their shops and/or apartments upon the completion of the renewal project was not achieved. The URAs Yee Dun Street renewal project was implemented and completed in 2015. However, as Ms Yeung said: ‘We have learnt so much in this whole thing!’ In the yearlong campaign, the Kiefangs of the concern group indeed did learn a great deal. In particular noted that with the help of several professionals, they had learnt the key concepts of UNESCO’s cultural heritage preservation process, and were able to apply these concepts to construct a ‘community heritage discourse’ as a public-acceptable weapon to fight against the powerful URA. Though both the URA and other government institutions have denied the discourse, both had to pay more attention to the conservation of urban heritage afterwards, as was acknowledged in the URAs webpage and government’s statements (see Lu 2009).

In the process of working with young and/or well-educated members, the Kiefangs also learnt how to utilise internet and mass media for their campaign. The concern group set up their own webpage and used the webpage to convey and publicise their ideas and messages to the public. It was also used to recruit members to the group. They also invited locally well-known intellectuals to write articles in newspapers and host talks on TV programmes to support their campaign thought connections held by the social workers and professionals of the group.

The Kiefangs also learnt how to transform the issue from a private to a public space and from an economic matter of individuals to a public economic, social and political matter. At the beginning of the conflict, as Mr Chen noted above, the issue raised by a few hundred Kiefangs focused on their economic loss, as they had not received sufficient compensation from the URA for the loss of ownership of their shops/business and residential apartments. The Kiefangs might have been viewed by millions of Hong Kong people as simply ‘greedy’. However, when the buildings were constructed as urban heritage and part of the material evidence of culture and the history of Hong Kong, the conflict became a social issue between the URA and millions of Hong Kong people, who, consciously or unconsciously, felt that they were associated with ‘local culture and history’. Further, the concern group in 2004 began to raise the Yee Dun Street case as a matter of ‘social fairness’, of the ‘rich and big property developers unfairly exploiting the poor local Kiefangs’, of ‘sustainable urban development’, and of ‘democratic urban planning’. They argued that ‘no one in the renewal project should suffer’, and ‘Kiefangs should be able to participate in the decision-making process of urban planning, not just being “consulted”, this is what democratic urban planning means’.18 These arguments of economic and social fairness and political democracy appealed to many people in contemporary Hong Kong, who have been unhappy with many economic, social and political issues since 1997.

In this ‘heritization’ process, the knowledge about local culture has gained cultural capital and empowered the local community members. Since the publicity of the Yee Dun Street campaign in 2004, many students from secondary schools or universities have visited the Wan Chai district and listened to Kiefangs of the concern group, learning about the Wan Chai culture as part of local culture and history. When a private community museum about the Wan Chai culture was established in 2007, a few Kiefangs of the Yee Dun Street concern group were invited as docents to lead cultural tours in Wan Chai.

Though the Yee Dun Street case was closed in 2007, the Yee Dun Street concern group still exists today as a group of political and social activities in Hong Kong, and a few of its core members have become very well-known social activists in Hong Kong. Members of the concern group have shared their experiences with many other community ‘concern groups’ in districts affected by the URA renewal projects, and they have participated in many protests and activities of local ‘heritage conservation’. Heritage has become a social movement for the purpose of protecting local culture and history. Since 2003, heritage has been the focus of many campaigns, including a 2006–2008 campaign to preserve the Blue House, also in Wan Chai (Lee 2009), another two campaigns to conserve the central market and the ex-police quarter in Central in 2010, and a campaign to conserve three buildings at Government Hill in 2010–2012. All the campaigns were launched by different local community ‘concern groups’ who were against government or its agency’s decisions to demolish a building or buildings, and all were successful. Though there are other unsuccessful cases, it cannot be denied that the formation and
the activities of the Yee Dun Street concern group marked the beginning of a heritage conservation movement in the early twentieth century in post-colonial Hong Kong, which has had a significant social transformation following 1997.

Conclusion

Hong Kong was never a city treasured much for its heritage before 1997. Many beautiful historic buildings have been demolished since the 1980s, and the public did not care much about their destruction. It was only after 1997, that heritage attracted significant public and government’s attention. Different types of heritage properties have been identified either by the government or by local communities for various reasons (Lu 2009).

Apart from the political cause of using heritage to differentiate mainland China and Hong Kong, and to subtly resist the political and cultural influences from mainland China after 1997 (Lu 2009), there are also economic factors for the sudden popularity of heritage in postcolonial Hong Kong, as it is a region with a high economic inequality. The Gini Coefficient (GC hereafter) was 0.525 in 2001, 0.533 in 2005 and increased to 0.537 in 2011 (Census and Statistics Department HKSAR 2012). After excluding the economically inactive households, the majority of which consisted of aged individuals, the GC was 0.488 in 2001, 0.490 in 2006 and 0.489 in 2011 (Census and Statistics Department HKSAR 2012), which is higher than the GC of mainland China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. Consequently, many Hong Kong citizens resent the rich, and blame the Hong Kong government’s policy for helping the rich to get richer at the cost of the poor, as claimed by Mr Gu of Yee Dun Street.

Urban renewal is a common issue in many cities in the world. In cities like Hong Kong with ever-increasing population and limited land, this issue is very thorny, as the rich property developers, with their economic capital, can often make big profits, at the cost of the suffering of the poor or the less well-off community members. The Yee Dun Street case marked the beginning of a ‘heritage conservation movement’ in Hong Kong, where the less powerful and the relatively poor community members could fight for their economic, political and social interests by constructing a ‘community heritage discourse’. As heritage conservation has been promoted by UNESCO, it has legitimated power and can thus attract increasing public support, including that of the mass media. Heritage has many uses (Smith 2006). In Hong Kong, heritage conservation has become a weapon of the less powerful to fight against the rich and the powerful, and the former are socially and politically empowered in the heritization process with the support of the public. The activities of individuals also have resulted in a social transformation in Hong Kong after 1997, when the local history and culture became much more valuable for the construction and enhancement of local cultural identities against that of the Chinese national identity.

The case of Yee Dun Street illustrates how some members of the local community construct a ‘local heritage’ by emphasising their ‘unique’ ‘local culture’. The majority of Hong Kong Chinese are migrants or decedents of migrants from different regions of mainland China. The construction of a boundary between ‘local’ and ‘migrants’ is a process of Othering (Waterton and Smith 2010), which has resulted in more social division and conflicts within and between social groups and different stakeholders. The goal of UNESCO to protect heritage is to encourage mutual respects between different cultures. If the identification and ‘preservation’ of heritage has caused more economic, political and social conflicts, this will not serve the purpose of heritage conservation, nor will it achieve ‘social inclusion’. How to strike a balance between ‘community heritage’ and a broader societal need is a question for us to consider.

Notes

1. In Hong Kong, the price of leasing or purchasing a property is calculated based on square feet. Depending on many factors, the price of per square feet varies in different districts.
2. Based on interviews conducted with local residents between July 2004 and August 2005 in Cantonese at Wan Chai, Hong Kong.
3. To protect the informants’ privacy, this is not the real name of the street, and the names used in this paper are not the informants’ real names.
4. Based on interviews conducted in June and July 2004 in Cantonese at Wan Chai, Hong Kong.
5. Interviewed conducted in June 2004 in Cantonese at Wan Chai, Hong Kong, and translated into English by the author. Note that this is not their real name, pseudonyms are used throughout.
6. Based on information gathered from interviews conducted between June and December 2004 in Cantonese at Wan Chai, Hong Kong.
7. Based on interviews conducted between July 2004 and August 2005 in Cantonese at Wan Chai, Hong Kong.
8. According to my participant-observation over one year, the number of members of the concern group was not stable.
9. Again, this is not the real name of the group.
10. In order to protect the privacy of the informants no actual names were used, and pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.
11. The interview was conducted in July 2004 in Wan Chai, Hong Kong in Cantonese. The informant showed the author the interview programme produced by the URA.
12. Interviews conducted in July 2004 in Wan Chai, Hong Kong in Cantonese, and translated into English by the author.
13. Interviews conducted in July 2004 in Wan Chai, Hong Kong in Cantonese, and translated into English by the author.
14. Based on interviews conducted in June and July 2004 in Cantonese at Wan Chai, Hong Kong.
15. Interview conducted in July 2004 in Wan Chai, Hong Kong in Cantonese, and translated into English by the author.
16. Based on information gathered at the weekly meetings and by interviews conducted in June and July 2004 in Wan Chai, Hong Kong.
17. Based on information gathered at the weekly meetings and by interviews conducted in June and July 2004 in Wan Chai, Hong Kong.
18. Based on information gathered at the weekly meetings and by interviews conducted in the summer of 2004 and 2005 in Wan Chai, Hong Kong.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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