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**Imagining a New Urban Commons:  
Heritage Preservation as/and Community Movements  
in Hong Kong**

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## **Imagining a New Urban Commons: Heritage Preservation as/and Community Movements in Hong Kong**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper reviews the community movements in Wanchai, Hong Kong, which mobilized the discourses of heritage preservation as a tactic to resist displacement and to support residents' rights to participate in the planning process. By contextualizing and analysing the Lee Tung Street (2004–2008) and Blue House Cluster community movements (2006–2012), this paper argues that the discourse of heritage preservation provides opportunities for potentially displaced communities to engage with the state without being distorted as “greedy residents”. In a highly commercialized society dominated by the property regime, “land” in Hong Kong has long been treated as a commodity. The dominant understanding of “rights” has often been associated with “ownership”. This paper argues that cultural heritage, associated with a “sense of place” and “place-attachment” transcends the public–private dichotomy, and provides an alternative understanding of “rights” disassociated from property ownership. Regardless of the results of the community movements, which cannot be determined solely by the affected residents and businesses, the paper suggests that the community movements in Wanchai actualize cultural heritage as a space to imagine a new urban commons.

## INTRODUCTION

Sau Ping was a long-time resident of Wanchai, an “old district” of Hong Kong that is threatened by urban renewal projects initiated by both the state and private sectors. She is still active in the community and a popular guide of cultural tours organized by a local non-government organization (NGO). One day, she was guiding a tour as usual and planned to take her group up to the rooftop of a conserved *tong lau*<sup>1</sup>, generally known as “Woo Cheong”, after the pawnshop that once occupied the site. When Sau Ping tried to lead her group up to the rooftop of “Woo Cheong” to discuss her opinions of urban renewal and heritage preservation in the area, the management of the high-end restaurant that occupied the building locked the lift, thus denying them access to the rooftop. Thus, this rooftop became an example for discussing the profit-driven heritage preservation in Hong Kong. The conserved “Woo Cheong” is located in the urban renewal project carried out by the statutory body, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA), and involved the use of state power as a result of the URA’s privileges to urge the government to resume the land through the *Lands Resumption Ordinance* (L. Huang 2002). In 2009, a local English-language newspaper report revealed that “under the consensus between the government and the URA”, the rooftop of the conserved “Woo Cheong” was, in fact, a “public open space”, even though this status was not stated clearly in the lease or on the master layout plan (Li 2009). The conversion of a tenement building containing a pawnshop into high-end restaurants is an example of gentrification, and a typical example of the re-colonization of urban space by capital in different cities. In the “Woo Cheong” example, this was carried out through heritage preservation. This is not the only case of turning heritage sites into exclusive and luxury venues in Hong Kong in recent years. Thus, the question is: why are there still community movements<sup>2</sup> in Hong Kong related to heritage preservation, or mobilizing the discourses of the preservation of cultural heritage in order to resist displacement?

The decade of the 2000s witnessed the rise of urban social movements related to cultural heritage in Hong Kong. Some scholars have asserted that the growing interest in developing local identities after the 1997 handover contributed to the rise of heritage activism in Hong Kong (Teather and Chow 2003; Henderson 2001). This is useful in understanding where the support for the threatened neighbourhoods came from when they mobilized the discourse of cultural heritage. Yet it fails to explain why the threatened neighbourhoods chose heritage preservation as their tactics in the first place. For the threatened neighbourhoods, any tactics that enabled them to resist displacement would be considered. Others contextualize the heritage-related activism in the city within the wider “cultural turn” of social movements in Hong Kong (So 2011). Tracey D.-L. Lu (2009, 2016), for instance, argues that heritage activism in Hong Kong during the 2000s has often been connected

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<sup>1</sup> According to Lee Ho Yin, *Tong lau* (literally “Chinese building”) is a term for “the urban shophouse typology that has acquired special characteristics peculiar to Hong Kong as a result of such local factors as land policy, town planning and building regulations, all of which combined to transform the design from the prototypical architecture in order to adapt it to local conditions and circumstances” (2010: 1). In Hong Kong, different styles of *tong lau* were built from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s, and are also called “tenement building(s)”.

<sup>2</sup> Castells defines “urban social movements” as “collective actions consciously aimed at the transformation of the social interests and values embedded in the forms and functions of a historically given city” (1983: xvi). The primary site of a community movement is an urban neighbourhood involving the contestation “over meanings of place” or “appropriate uses of land in a particular place” (Martin 2013: 91). In the Hong Kong context, a “community movement” is a particular form of urban social movement concentrated in particular neighbourhoods, mainly triggered by the threat of displacement. In this paper, “neighbourhood” refers to the spatial and geographical dimension of a localized entity, and sometimes also the residents and business owners within it; “community” refers to the neighbourhood with a “sense of belonging” or “sense of community” “defined by relationship network and self-identification” (King 2015: 9).

with wider political-economic and socio-cultural demands, and that “(community) heritage” discourses were used as the “weapons” of resistance. Along these lines, the threatened communities’ tactics of mobilizing heritage preservation are regarded as culture-led tactics by and for the benefit of the weak in an era witnessing the rise of “culture-led urban regeneration” (Lee 2012; Paddison and Miles 2007). However, the adaptability of the notion of the “culture-led urban regeneration” in East Asia has also been questioned (Tang 2016). In responding to the “cultural turn” of social movements, and the adaptation of heritage preservation as a tactic to resist displacement, there has also been scepticism. Following Sharon Zukin’s (1982, 1987) criticism of culture’s role in gentrification, Jackie Kwok (2011) criticized the way in which community movements were “spectacularizing” the neighbourhood. She argued that they were failing to address or criticize the capitalist logic of urban renewal, and would merely encourage gentrification and lead to displacement. Yet this criticism overlooks the contexts of the communities’ mobilization of discourses of cultural heritage, and thus underestimates the possibilities of cultural heritage as a resource for resistance, and space for imagining a different urban politics.

Without denying the practices of using cultural heritage for capital accumulation, this paper aims to examine the possibilities of heritage preservation as a tactic for imagining and creating a new urban commons in the neoliberalizing city. As well as the community movements in Wanchai, there were also other heritage-related community movements in other districts in Hong Kong during a similar period. The advocacies to preserve Graham Street Market and Wing Lee Street in the neighbouring Central and Western District are two examples. However, I have chosen to discuss the community movements in Wanchai in the paper because they were among the first to consciously mobilize the discourses of heritage preservation in order to resist displacement during the decade. They also created a paradigm shift in how the affected neighbourhoods respond to urban renewals. Through analysing the movements’ narratives, and by contextualizing and examining the inter-connected community movements in Wanchai during the 2000s, I argue that seemingly de-politicized cultural heritage provides a space for the threatened neighbourhoods to channel their demands and to challenge the dominant social paradigm in a highly-commercialized city. Many scholars believe that cultural materials are important in building up new identities and a sense of belonging, which further facilitates social changes (Castells 2010; Tseng 2007; Ku 2012). My discussion develops from this argument. In spite of the various degrees of success of the community movements, however limited, I suggest that their contributions extend beyond their neighbourhood boundaries. By developing a discourse of asserting rights on the basis of heritage and place-attachment, and beyond the language of property ownership, the community movements echo the recent revival of the notion of the “right of the city” (Harvey 2003, 2013). They open up an alternative imagination of urban politics, and the possibility to imagine a new urban commons beyond the private–public binary opposition, upon which neoliberal regimes rely.

## **WANCHAI IN THE SHADOW OF URBAN RENEWALS**

After the gradual completion of several large-scale “new towns”, the decentralization of the population to the suburbs of Hong Kong during the 1980s coincided with the rise of property development as the most profitable business. As a result, the colonial government shifted its focus of capital accumulation back to the urban area. In the late 1980s, the statutory body, the Land Development Corporation (LDC), was set up to speed up urban renewal in Hong Kong. In contrast to previous piecemeal urban renewal projects carried out by different sectors, the LDC had several focal areas on both sides of the Victoria Harbour, including Wanchai. Many of these areas are still targeted for urban renewal, by both the state and non-state sectors, even more than a decade after the dissolving of the LDC. The LDC was unpopular among the neighbourhoods affected by its projects, and regarded as “inefficient” by both the state and developers (Lam, 2008; S. Huang, 2015). In order

to speed up urban renewal (and capital accumulation), the LDC's successor, the URA, set up in 2001, was empowered by the government through the *Lands Resumption Ordinance*. The URA was able to seek government orders for compulsory resumption of the land entity, regardless of the URA's successful rate of acquisition, provided that the land is required for "public purposes". However, "public purposes", and "public interest" are arbitrary terms, and have often been abused by the URA. The Ordinance has favoured the URA over homeowners in the urban renewal sites (S. Huang, 2015). In practice, after resuming the land, the URA usually collaborates with private property developers to redevelop the sites, and the profit made is not transferred into public revenues. Virtually none of the URA's redevelopment projects has provided affordable housing. Often, several of its projects within the same district would be close to each other, and started almost simultaneously. Thus, affected residents or businesses found it difficult to look for new homes or shops in the district. The displacement and destruction of viable businesses became inevitable in the URA's mode of urban renewal, which was dominated by demolition-and-rebuild practices (Chau, To, and Lee, 2007).

Wanchai, located to the east of Central, has been a target area for urban renewal projects initiated by both the state and non-state sectors. During the early colonial period, Wanchai was one of the major areas of settlement for the ethnic Chinese neighbouring the colony's political-economic centre, separated by the Central Barracks. Vernacular *tong lau* began to emerge in Wanchai from the late 19th century onwards. "Woo Cheong" was an example of these. After the 1930s, different kinds of industries, such as printing, construction, and rattan furniture-making, began to cluster in Wanchai. The part of Wanchai that developed earliest, to the south of Hennessey Road, was later colloquially known as "Old Wanchai". During the 1950s and 1960s, this developed into a very vibrant, mixed-use area (Yuen, Yu, and Chen, 2007; S. Huang, 2015). After the Central Barracks were demolished in the 1980s, office towers and commercial developments were constructed on the original barracks site, simultaneously expanding the commercial area of Hong Kong and removing the "buffer zone" between Central and Wanchai. After the establishment of the LDC, Wanchai was chosen as one of the focal areas for urban renewal. The LDC launched seven projects in Wanchai, but only three were completed before its dissolution. The URA took up the LDC's remaining projects, and launched its own new projects. The two cases discussed in this paper are: Lee Tung Street, which was located in former LDC projects taken over by the URA (Project number: H15), and the Blue House Cluster, which was a project initiated by the URA, in partnership with the Hong Kong Housing Society (Project number: H05-26).<sup>3</sup> Although some of the URA's projects entail elements of preservation, as stated in their official narrative, few emerged during the early stages. Even the preservation of "Woo Cheong", of which the URA was very proud, had not been decided at the beginning of the project. The only exception was the Blue House Cluster, which began as a heritage preservation project. Nevertheless, the URA's original plan was to displace the residents, and transform the Blue House Cluster into a tourist attraction (A. Wong, 2011). In short, there was no option of "staying" for the affected residents and businesses in the state-initiated urban renewal projects, regardless of whether the buildings were to be preserved or not. The people affected were displaced. The residents and businesses affected by both projects were offered no other possibilities but to accept "compensation" from the URA. The only "option" was to negotiate for a higher

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<sup>3</sup> Besides Lee Tung Street and the Blue House Cluster, there was another community movement trying to save the Wanchai Street market, which was due to be evicted to make rooms for cars for the luxury residential towers in the URA's "H9" project.

“compensation”.<sup>4</sup> In short, the URA often views “properties” in terms of exchange value. Yet, the residents’ and businesses’ unwillingness to relocate cannot be articulated merely in terms of property and exchange value. Their reasons include emotional attachment to place, a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood or district, and the spatial and networking requirements of certain types of business. However, in Wanchai and other project areas, the URA’s failure to offer members of the affected neighbourhoods the options to “stay”, “move back”, or participate in urban renewal meant that the needs of these residents and businesses could not be met.

### CONTEXTUALIZING HERITAGE PRESERVATION AS COMMUNITY MOVEMENTS IN WANCHAI

Before the community movements based in Lee Tung Street (known as “Wedding Card Street”, 2004–2008) and the Blue House Cluster (2006–2012) in Wanchai, there were also other forms of community movement. The main concerns of these earlier movements during the 1970s to 1990s were the housing rights of ordinary people and the improvement of their living environments. Unlike the community movements in Wanchai during the 2000s, local histories, memories, and place-attachment were seldom mobilized as resources or tactics in the protests (Ho, 2000; Leung, 2000; H. Wong, 1995).

In late 2003, the URA announced plans to launch an urban redevelopment project in the Lee Tung Street area.<sup>5</sup> Aided by volunteering professionals, some affected residents and businesses formed the “H15 Concern Group” in 2004. Rather than negotiating for a higher price for the acquisition, the owner-occupiers wanted to use their “property ownership” to “participate” in the urban renewal process, and to exchange their current property for a flat or a shop in the original or a nearby site, after the urban renewal. This was summed up in their slogan “flat-for-flat, shop-for-shop” (*lau wun lau, pou wun pou* 樓換樓, 舖換舖) and “ownership participation” in the urban renewal project (S. Huang, 2015; Chau, To, and Lee, 2007). They also mobilized the discourse of heritage preservation, and developed the rhetoric of preservation of the streetscape in support of their demands. The community called for the preservation of the signature *tong laus* in the middle of the street. They also articulated the existing local economy – namely, the clustering of printing and other wedding-related industries – as “local characteristics” worthy of being conserved and sustained. They also re-interpreted their mutual-aid and local business networks in the neighbourhood as the “social network of the local communities”. The URA was supposed to “promote sustainable development” and preserve the built heritage, “local characteristics” and “social network of the local communities” according to their guidance document, the *Urban Renewal Strategy* (Planning and Lands Bureau, 2001, p. 2). By mobilizing the discourse of heritage preservation, the affected community was able to legitimately criticize the URA’s redevelopment plan, and to propose their alternative “Dumbbell Proposal”, which aims to protect the built heritage, “local characteristics”, and their existing social and business networks (S. Huang, 2015; Lai, 2004; King, 2015; A. Wong, 2011; Chau, To, and Lee,

<sup>4</sup> The lump sum offered by the URA is often called “compensation” in newspaper reports and colloquial expression, applicable to both landlords and tenants (Fung 2013; Oriental Daily 2013a). However, the word “compensation” is misleading. The URA often collaborates with private developers to build on the resumed lands to accumulate capital and the generated income does not return to public revenue. In this sense, as the current chairman of the URA, Victor So admits, “The URA is also a developer” (Oriental Daily 2013b), which is backed up by the state. When a private developer acquires land from private landlords for redevelopment, such action is usually called “purchase” or “acquisition”, not “compensation”. The word “compensation” easily misleads people into thinking that the lump sum offered involves public money rather than a transaction between a developer and a private landlord.

<sup>5</sup> The H15 project area includes Lee Tung Street, parts of the neighbouring Amoy Street and Queen’s Road East, and McGregor Street.

2007; Lam, 2008; Wong, Cheng, and Luk, 2006). Despite the community's efforts, their alternative plan was turned down, and the demolition started in late 2007. In the URA's new project, the whole of Lee Tung Street would be turned into luxury apartments and themed shopping malls. The URA's demolish-and-rebuild plan was also accused of having "plagiarized" the form of the bottom-up "Dumbbell Proposal" without including the actual content (King, 2015). The street has now disappeared from the map.

While the Lee Tung Street community movement was taking place, the URA partnered with the Hong Kong Housing Society to announce another project in the nearby Blue House Cluster in 2006. In the partners' original plan, the *tong laus* were to be partially preserved and transformed into a tourist attraction, while all the current residents would be evicted. The plan was criticized as a "fake" and "mummified" preservation (Szeto and Sham, 2006). The community movement was made up of the affected residents, other concerned community members of Wanchai (including several active H15 Concern Group members), social workers from the nearby community centre, and volunteering professionals. Building upon the experiences of other community movements, the Blue House community movement mobilized the discourses of both "housing rights" and "living heritage preservation" to cater for the different needs of the affected residents in the very early stages. Building upon the discourse of "living heritage preservation", the community movement presented an alternative proposal, which could "keep both the houses and the people" (*lau uk jau lau jan* 留屋又留人). In their alternative proposal, those residents who wanted to relocate somewhere else were to be resettled in their desired public housing estates, while those who wanted to stay were given the right to move back after the renovation. The remaining units were to be designated for community and cultural uses (A. Wong, 2011; S. Huang, 2015; Chen and Szeto, 2015; King, 2015). After the huge protests and outcries over the demolition of the Star Ferry and Queen's Piers and Lee Tung Street in 2006–2007, the government later withdrew the Blue House Cluster as a URA project, and placed it as part of the Revitalizing Historic Buildings through Partnership Scheme. In 2010, the community movement successfully secured its role as a "partner" in the revitalization scheme, and in 2012 it secured the necessary government funding to implement its alternative plan, "Viva Blue House". By 2017, the renovation has nearly been completed. Recruitment of new tenants to the remaining units has also started.

Despite their inter-connections and the later development of active members' wider concerns about reforming urban renewal policies, urban neighbourhoods are still the primary sites for community movements in Wanchai. The community movements in Lee Tung Street and the Blue House Cluster were primarily a contestation of appropriate uses of land in these particular neighbourhoods. Both community movements, which took place in two neighbourhoods of Wanchai within a ten-minute walk, mobilized the discourses of heritage preservation to resist displacement by state-sponsored urban renewal projects. In both movements, "heritage" was not limited to the built heritage. Rather, living and intangible cultural heritage, such as the livelihoods of community members, the local economies, and business and social networks, was highlighted. The preservation of built heritage was inseparable from sustaining the living and intangible heritage. For instance, the ground floors of *tong laus* in Lee Tung Street provided the essential spatial requirements for the wedding-card printing industry. Thus, the preservation of the *tong laus* in the community's "Dumbbell Proposal" was not only advocated due to the architectural interest, but also for sustaining the local economies (Chau, To, and Lee, 2007). In spite of their comparable tactics, the results of the two community movements were different. Civil society actors believe that the success of the Blue House community movement was the government's response to the vigorous protests against the demolition of the Star Ferry and Queen's Piers, another heritage-related urban social movement paralleling the two community movements (King, 2015). As Yuk Wah Chan and Vivian Lee (2017) correctly point out, the Hong Kong government still lacks coherent and integrated structures and strategies for cultural governance and heritage management, despite cultural heritage having



become a site of vigorous debate in the city. As a result, the government still responds to heritage-related controversies in a case-by-case manner, rather than by following long-term visions and plans. Wanchai was not the only area where discourses of heritage preservation were mobilized to resist the displacements brought about by urban renewal projects. The major criticism of the “cultural turn” tactics was that the community movements failed to directly address or criticize the capitalist logic of urban renewal. Accordingly, the heritage discourse participated in “spectacularizing” the “old districts”, and produced a gentrified, middle-class “cultural Wanchai”, ultimately driving out the residents and businesses, as Jackie Kwok (2011) comments. Yet, such criticism fails to understand the context of how and why the discourse of heritage preservation was mobilized. The affected communities in Wanchai did not actively take up the notion of “local culture” or “heritage” to attract consumers or tourists. Rather, they only chose heritage preservation as a tactic after they knew that they would be evicted. Even if the affected communities did not choose such tactics, they would be evicted if there were no changes in the URA’s plans. The mobilization of the discourse of heritage preservation would not place the affected communities in a disadvantaged position. Rather, it is an indirect way of criticizing the capitalist logic of a highly commercialized society dominated by the discourses of the pro-growth machine. When the mobilization of heritage preservation as a tactic to resist displacement is understood in this context, it is possible to evaluate the possibilities opened up by this approach.

In a highly commercialized and developmentalist society such as Hong Kong, economic success is defined by transactions in the property market, and land, flats, and shops are regarded as commodities. Exchange value is prioritized over use value. Such ideas and narratives have also been reproduced widely in the mainstream media. Regardless of whether it was the ideological constraints, or having worked too closely with the URA by many editors and journalists<sup>6</sup>, news reports related to the urban renewal projects were often framed into a handful of dominant approaches. Within these approaches, the URA’s perspective dominated. The URA was often depicted as a “considerate” and “reasonable” organization willing to negotiate. It was carrying out urban redevelopment projects for the benefit of society. On the other hand, those residents and businesses who refused to leave were depicted as selfish and greedy minorities, who only wanted more “compensation”. The complexity of the conflict was reduced to an issue of money. Discussions of the problems with the urban renewal policy and why the price for acquisition was insufficient were often absent (K. Lam, 2008). The narrative in the mainstream media represented the dominant social paradigms. These include a developmentalist understanding of “progress”, and a vision of the property regime that prioritizes exchange value. The general public thus had an impression that people were refusing to leave merely because they were “greedy” and simply wanted “more compensation” (Tang, 2004; A. Wong, 2011; Hui, 2004; Chau, To, and Lee, 2007). In such a context, pursuing arguments involving the issue of the rate paid for acquisitions would be ignored or misinterpreted. Many active members of the community movements in Wanchai were fully aware of how bringing up the issue of “money” could be counter-productive.<sup>7</sup> Thus, they needed to find a way to channel their demands that would not be reduced to the question of “compensation” and a “greedy-ones-want-more” narrative (S. Huang, 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> I owe this insight to Chloe Lai.

<sup>7</sup> In one of their leaflets, H15 Concern Group classified the different approaches to how news about urban renewals had been reported in Hong Kong. These categories included “government propaganda” and “compensation means all” (Lam, 2008, p. 225). When an active member of the group, who had previously owned a stall in Lee Tung Street, helped to organize the residents and businesses in later movements, she often reminded them not to talk about money in front of the media.

When the URA was set up, “preservation” was claimed to be one of its approaches to urban renewal. As listed in its guiding *Urban Renewal Strategy* (URS), the “main objectives” of the process include the preservation of “buildings, sites and structures of historical, cultural or architectural interest”, “practical local characteristics”, and “the social networks of the local community” (Planning and Lands Bureau, 2001). Since the URA had not defined these key terms in the main objectives, the affected communities were able to incorporate them into the process of community-building and defending their rights, and they phrased their demands in these terms. In this sense, the community group mobilized the discourses of cultural heritage in order to raise these concerns and demanded their right to stay so that the networks and their livelihoods could be sustained. In the case of the Blue House Cluster, the URA declared that it was carrying out a preservation and revitalization project. The community movement took up this opportunity to argue for a “living heritage preservation” to defend the rights of the residents and local businesses. In other words, the URA actually opened up the possibility for heritage preservation to come into the scene in policy terms. Furthermore, sentimental expressions towards the “past” are quite often ways to express discontent about a less-preferred present or future (Chua, 1995). The affected communities not only took the weapon from the enemy to resist displacements, they also demanded the right to participate in the planning process, which could sustain their local environments, livelihoods, and economies. The community movements coincided with changing district politics in Wanchai, and rising concerns about cultural heritage and local identity in Hong Kong. The more progressive district councils gave their support to the heritage discourses, and tried to frame urban renewals beyond the “compensation” frameworks (A. Wong, 2011; King, 2015). These changing social attitudes towards cultural heritage and local identity make it possible for the “Wanchai story” to be translated into a “common experience” and thus a vernacular “Hong Kong story”. The seemingly “depoliticized” and “mild” face of cultural heritage was able to become an alternative way for people to understand urban renewals beyond the dominant social paradigms.

### **SPACE OF IMAGINING A NEW URBAN COMMONS**

Regardless of the immediate results, the community movements in Wanchai ushered in a paradigm shift for how communities articulate their rights, from “compensation”-related terms to heritage preservation and participation in the planning process. We can also observe a paradigm shift from the language and logic of a property regime to something irreducible to such logic (S. Huang, 2015, p. 70). Active community members of Wanchai became veterans in urging urban renewal policy reforms. Learning from the experiences of Wanchai, neighbourhoods in other districts threatened by the URA’s urban renewal projects also mobilized similar tactics to resist displacement and to propose alternative plans that could sustain local livelihoods. Regardless of the varying results, and instead of judging the paradigm shift from the results, I argue that the significance of this “cultural turn” is that it opens up the space to imagine and create a new urban commons in the neoliberalizing era. As Mirana Szeto and Yun-chung Chen (2015) suggest, the operational logic in colonial Hong Kong shared many similarities with present-day neoliberalism. Rather than “rolling back” welfare state policies, neoliberalization in Hong Kong has taken the route of intensifying pre-existing policies and practices from the colonial period. The establishment of the URA to speed up the “recycling” of urban spaces for capital accumulation is just one example of this. Nevertheless, the understanding and association of land ownership and rights was also rooted in colonial Hong Kong. Through mobilizing the discourse of heritage preservation in order to assert their rights, the community movements depart from the logic of a property regime, and articulate rights in terms that disassociate them from property ownership.

As contextualized above, Hong Kong's land policy is dominated by the property ownership regime. Land has long been treated as a commodity, and the rights of property owners often override the rights of others. Revenues from land sales have been a significant income for the government in both the colonial and post-handover periods (Nissim, 1998). In order to sell land, or grant a lease over land, the colonial government created the concept of "crown land" and applied it to Hong Kong, especially in urban areas, regardless of any possible pre-existing land rights or ownership. Similar to other British colonies in Asia, "public" land in the colonial context simply refers to any piece of land owned or managed by the municipal administration. The creation of "public" concepts of space or land by the colonial government would then translate into what were understood as "public" goods by the colonial administration. The "public" was quite often restricted to a small group of elite citizens. In practice, "public" and "private" became a pair of concepts based on property ownership. Rather than serving as a guardian, the state often treats "public" land as though it is the state's private property. The designation of "public", in the colonial context, was a process of dispossession and "privatization" of the commons (Glover, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Yeoh, 1996). Such land practices are continued, if not worsened, after the handover. The "crown land" has since then been renamed as "government land". Revenue from land sales is still an important income for the post-handover state. The state-backed urban renewal projects, and the arbitrarily-defined "public interest" in the process amplify how the state treats "public" land as its own private property. The state also participates in the property regime. Urban neighbourhoods in Hong Kong, especially those close to the central business districts, are facing "super-gentrification" (Lees, 2003; Butler and Lees, 2006). Even middle-class residents are likely to be driven out in the process of creating an exclusive enclave for the super-rich.

Instead of operating from the logic of a property regime that prioritizes exchange value, the community movements understand flats and shops in terms of use value. Rather than demanding monetary "compensation", the shop-owners and residents, regardless of their status as property owners or tenants, aimed at sustaining their livelihoods and business networks in the neighbourhood, and strove to participate in the planning process. In other words, the understanding of "rights" in these community movements were disassociated from property ownership. Rather, it is the attachment to place, the urban neighbourhoods in the context of community movements, that provides the grounds for the claiming of rights. Place, as a spatial and temporal entity within which identification with the community movements primarily occurs, informs and frames the community movements (Massey, 2005; Martin 2003, 2013). Similarly, cultural heritage is also a site where the perspective of space, time, and identity is negotiated. How a person identifies, for instance, affects how he or she understands the spatial and temporal perspective of the site, and vice versa. Cultural heritage, with the perspective of place-attachment, functions as what Deborah Martin (2003, 2013) calls "place frames", which makes it possible for the urban neighbourhoods, marginalized by the neoliberalizing regime, to make sense of their identities and activism. When the community movements mobilized the heritage preservation discourses, they were not only concerned about the buildings. The emphasis on the *actually existing* local characteristics and social networks, and the "living heritage" of the community movements in Wanchai regarded the existing residents and business within and surrounding the neighbourhood as an inseparable part of the heritage. The story-telling of the neighbourhoods by the community members was a tactic that was constantly used. Through these story-tellings, the community members chose which perspectives on their livelihoods were important to them. This also supported the claim that their right to stay and their right to participate in the planning process should be respected and allowed in. The discourses of heritage preservation not only provides the basis for the demands of community movements, but also draws the boundary of inclusion for who belongs to the community, in the face of super-gentrifying Wanchai. As Tseng Shu-cheng (2007) argues, a "community" is not a pre-existing entity; a neighbourhood with a sense of community, which includes social and psychological bonding, needs to be built up. "Community building" projects mobilize and reshape the community's understandings

of local history and of the relations that arise between such understandings. Through such processes, the community actively engages with and re-articulates history and place, which reinforces their place-attachment and sense of community. Community movements initiated in order to counter threats often require various place-based tactics to resist. Drawing on local symbols as resources in order to create a collective identity has been a common tactic used by urban neighbourhoods across different regions. Place-based memories, local landmarks, heritage, landscapes, and local industries and products are some of these symbols. In the process of mobilization, a new understanding and identity around the community is also formed (Castells, 1983; Tseng, 2007; Sorensen and Funck, 2007; Nishimura, 2007; Martin, 2003, 2013). In Wanchai, the sense of crisis initiated by the threat of displacement sparked the community movements. In the process, a “sense of community”, i.e. a form of sense of belonging to a place that is larger than the boundary of one’s residence, was built up and consolidated (Cresswell, 2004). In the process of articulating their experiences of the past, through mobilization of the discourses of heritage preservation, many stories about the livelihoods of individuals that had been previously ignored by dominant historical narratives were brought up. The “past” has also become a channel to express discontent about the less-preferred future (Chua, 1995, 1997). Thus, the mobilization of heritage discourses helped to build a “resistance identity” that “[builds] trenches of resistance”, and “project identity” that “redefines their position in society” (Castells, 2010, p. 10). These provide a space for projecting a future that cannot be reduced to the language of property ownership. In short, the discourses of heritage preservation also strengthen an understanding of land that extends beyond the property regime. The communities’ demands for their rights were disassociated from property ownership. Their rights to stay and to participate in the planning process were not based on the understanding of rights rooted in the property regime that dated back to the colonial period. In other words, a new conceptualization of land was actually imagined through the community movements, even though the individual members may not necessarily recognize this.

As argued before, the necessity of sustaining their social networks and livelihoods were the core demands embedded in the heritage discourses. These could not be reduced to the language of exchange value employed by the neoliberal regime. Rather, use value and rights that were independent of property ownership were emphasized in the community movements and their alternative plans. In reviewing Lee Tung Street community movement, Shu-mei Huang develops Henri Lefebvre’s concept of a “right to the city”, and argues that one focus of the movement is the “right to planning”, “which distinguished their campaign from others which stressed property rights” (S. Huang 2015, p. 68). I argue that the “right to planning” was also witnessed in the Blue House Cluster community movement. Both community movements emphasize the existing communities’ rights and roles within decision-making in the planning process. The “right to the city” and “right to planning” are strongly related to each other. For Lefebvre, a right to the city “is a claim for the recognition of the urban as the (re)producer of social relations of power, and the right to participation in it” (Gilbert and Dikeç, 2008, p. 254), and “can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life” (Lefebvre 1996, p. 158). As demonstrated in the community movements in Wanchai, when an urban community faces displacement as a result of neoliberalization processes, backed up by state coercion, the mobilization of heritage discourses can back up their alternative proposals that will defend their rights. The “right to planning”, and the refusal to be trapped within the logic of the property regime (i.e. to be trapped into negotiating for higher “compensation”), is a process of collective disagreement with, and redefining the understanding of, property and land. Rather than understanding property and land as exchangeable commodities, the use value of the individual shop and flat is valued. Through the discourses of (living) heritage preservation, the community movements emphasized values and perspectives that are irreducible to property ownership. The community members’ right to participate in the planning process was not based on property ownership, but rested on the fact that they had been living, working, or participating in the community and were the agents responsible for creating the

meaning of the place. Place attachment, rather than property ownership, defines this “right”. In this sense, the “right to planning” is a way of accessing the “renewed right to urban life”. The recognition of the rights are disassociated from property ownership, and that property owners’ rights are not absolute are important in challenging capitalist logic in the neoliberalizing city. Without this disassociation of rights and property ownership, the livelihood of city-dwellers will become further alienated in the multiple waves of privatization that Hong Kong and other cities in the region are facing.

Responding to the worsening urban politics under the neoliberalizing condition, there has been a revival of interest in the concept of the “right to the city”, within both academia and social movements (Soja, 2010). A notable example is David Harvey’s recent book *Rebel Cities* (2013). The privatization of public space, including the invention of “privately owned” or privately managed public spaces, is a threat to the right to the city. Yet, even the public –ownership of land does not guarantee its “publicness”, when the state simply treats “public” or “government” land as if it is the state’s private property. In short, if the state still believes that it has an absolute right in decision-making over a piece of land, including whether and when to transfer the land for capital accumulation, the “publicness” of the land is not guaranteed. Thus, there is a need to go beyond the public–private dichotomy. In urban social movements defending “public spaces” and protecting them from privatization, including community movements, whether a piece of land is publicly, (state) owned or privately owned is not their central concern. Edward Soja correctly points out that what urban scholars and activists mean by “public space” is “a localized urban expression of the notion of common property or, as it was called, the urban commons” (Soja, 2010, p. 45). In pre-Enclosure England, the “commons” was a form of land either individually or collectively owned, but the commoners, even though they did not own the land, had the right to use it (*profit à prendre*) (Neeson, 1993). Despite the variations in practices and contestations in use, what is useful for us in rethinking the urban future is that one’s right to the use of land was disassociated from land ownership, and existed beyond the modern public–private dichotomy. To revive the concept of the “commons” in the neoliberalization era provides an alternative understanding of “rights” that extends beyond property ownership, and thus beyond exchange value. The “right to the city” is a “common” right that extends beyond discourses of property ownership. Harvey, for instance, devotes a chapter in *Rebel Cities* to discussing the creation of new urban commons. The major argument against the “commons”, and thus in favour of the private property regime, is represented by the example cited in Garrett Hardin’s “The Tragedy of the Commons”. Accordingly, as “rational” beings, the commoners’ desire to maximize their gains from the commons they share and are able to freely access will ultimately jeopardize both the land and the commoners’ livelihood, due to unlimited desire and limited resources. Thus, following this logic, the encirclement of land and the allocation of exclusive rights to the property owner is a preferable injustice compared to total ruin (Hardin, 1968). Hardin’s original concern was population growth and control. Yet his metaphor often overshadowed his intention, and became partial justification for privatization, in the atmosphere of polarization between coercive state power and a private property regime (Garnett, 2012; Harvey, 2013). However, major problems with the “Tragedy of the Commons” are that the thesis is based on the hypothesis that the relationship between people and land is *necessarily* exploitative, and that the right is based upon such an exploitative relationship. What has been ignored is that there can be circumstances in which non-property owners, as members of a community, claim the right to intervene in order to protect themselves and others, and to prevent the property owners from exploiting the land. A property owner’s exploitative act over the land he or she owns may create negative externalities that the non-property owners living in the area (similar to the “commoners” in the historic commons) have to bear, such as environmental pollution and destruction of cultural heritage. If rights are necessarily associated with property ownership, and the property owners’ rights are considered absolute, the people affected will have no way to intervene. Here, the disassociation of rights and ownership that exists in the “commons” is useful. The “commons” does

not deny the rights of the property owner; however, under the “commons”, the property owner’s rights are not absolute, and the “commoners” can also claim certain forms of rights. The “commons” and “commoners” are also both inclusive and exclusive at the same time. They include non-property owners, but this does not mean that the commons is open to everyone. Using the historical example as a metaphor, the commoners had the right to allow their cattle to eat the grass on a certain common but not on others. This echoes the notion of community, which is also both inclusive and exclusive. One is considered a member of, or included in, a community based on notions that are disassociated from property ownership, such as attachment, identity, etc. Heritage has often been associated with the sense of place and place-attachment, which goes “beyond the boundaries of residence to include the wider sense of belonging” (May, 2000, p. 748). To imagine heritage as a form of urban commons, in practice, is to claim one’s rights on the basis of notions disassociated from property ownership, and thus to usher in the idea of the right to the city and ideas of alternatives beyond the property regime. The community movements in Wanchai not only mobilized the heritage discourse and emphasized the use value of the flat and shop, they also recognized the importance of shared spaces, such as the street, for the community’s life. The community movements actualize cultural heritage as a space for re-imagining the commons, in terms of both space and rights.

#### **CONCLUSION: HERITAGE AS SPACES OF HOPE**

The community movements in Wanchai were not isolated cases to resist the injustice of urban (re-)development in Hong Kong in the mid-2000s. As Manuel Castells (1983) suggests, active participants in urban social movements often span different social classes, even though they may have different priorities. In the neoliberalizing city of Hong Kong, both working-class and middle-class people have been subjected to displacement in the super-gentrifying urban renewal projects. Thus, the community movements in Wanchai also spread across different classes, and combined the issues of heritage preservation and resistance to displacement. Although community movements may seem to be mobilizing a “depoliticized” and “tame” tactic of (living) heritage preservation; paradoxically, it is through bypassing the more direct political-economic critique, and bypassing the language of distribution, that a critique of the property regime, and imagining alternatives beyond, becomes possible. The discourses of heritage preservation and the emphasis on the use value, instead of the exchange value, of the land provide a paradigm shift in community movements, from a more passive “right to stay” to a more active “right to planning”. In the neoliberalizing city, capital accumulation by “recycling” urban spaces operates best in the absence of place-based identities and the sense of place. As different scholars have demonstrated, place-attachment and place-based identity provide the basis for strong resistance to the uprooting and demolition of urban landmarks. As a shared and “common” notion, cultural heritage provides an alternative through which one’s relationship with a place can be addressed beyond, if not irreducible to, the terms of “property” and exchange value. Cultural heritage can be used to address the right to the city, including the right to planning, because the notion goes beyond the logic of “private property” and exchange value. In this sense, the mobilization of heritage preservation in community movements provides space for imagining a new urban commons. Similar to many other urban social movements, such tactics may not always be successful. They may face many challenges, and not necessarily from within. Yet, it is through these spaces for desiring a better future, that “spaces of hope” (Harvey, 2000) are created, no matter how small they may be.

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