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Note on romanization

All names of villages, districts and persons are written in Cantonese Romanization as appropriate to the local context discussed. In some cases, previously utilised names of specific places, e.g., Ün Long, are used when referring to specific period in history – in that case, name used in present-day context follows in the brackets.

Abstract

This research aims to investigate the relationship between cultural heritage preservation, the evolving identities of rural communities, and the effect the phenomenon has on the village-town dynamic. This paper engages critically with the intricate relationship between cultural conservation and the shifting boundaries of Hong Kong's New Towns, drawing from a recent debate on the Northern Metropolis project and its possible implications on Yuen Long district rural community. The countryside and cultural heritage preservation projects funded in Hong Kong in recent years have focused on the revitalisation of green enclaves, mostly abandoned between the 1960s and the present time. Despite incorporating modern strategies such as eco-tourism, many revitalisation projects adhere to the concept of loss aversion, idealizing a notion of unchanged traditional society with its characteristic architectural style. Curiously, less attention is paid to the villages located on the fringes of New Towns, which boundaries blend together physically, socially and economically, with urbanities coexisting with communities still retaining their clan ties and related identities.

This paper focuses on examining how traditional society is reinterpreted in the face of change and loss of a former way of life, practice, and social structure with a particular emphasis on understanding the shifting notion of a village, and its function in rural society. It asks how countryside conservation strategies, in the fluid context of the northwest New Territories [NT] can be reinterpreted from cataloguing the past to progress, and future-driven practice, building on the theory of potential in loss as an active method of protecting rural communities, while redefining current economic and social dynamic between ruralities and urbanities and addressing the challenges faced by the urban resident. In doing so, it proposes a framework to facilitate self-managed design processes to actively protect community values in northwest NT as an alternative to current revitalisation strategies applied in the green enclave context, and as this paper explains limited to it .

Keywords

Liquid cultures, Cultural preservation, Tradition, Traditional society, Village, Change, Countryside conservation, Land management

Volume 01.

Change

Introduction

Hong Kong is portrayed as a highly urbanised, dense metropolis. However, over 75% of its land is covered by 642 recognised villages, mainly in the New Territories (NT) and outlying islands. Until the mid-20th century, local village lifestyle characterised by agri-, and aqua-culture practices experienced little to no change. However, economic and industrial developments since the 1950s, the emergence of elaborate public transportation infrastructure, followed by effective urban expansion - New Town, and modern socio-political ideologies have brought "gradual but irreversible changes to local society" (DiStefano & Lee 2002, p.22). In parallel, legal and administrative policies in the 1970s - intended to provide compensation for the development of land in rural areas, have eventually resulted in the abuses of indigenous privilege, and further modification of the physical and cultural landscape of rural Hong Kong.

The announcement of the Northern Metropolis Development Strategy (NMDS) in 2021 as part of the "Hong Kong 2030+" scheme - a spatial planning framework to update the territorial development, confirmed New Territories' position as a land bank of the city (Fig. 1). The project's conceptual boundary covers the Yuen Long and the North districts, proposing New Development Areas equivalent of mentioned nine New Towns, expansion of existing urban centres and construction of public transportation infrastructure to populate the area of 600ha within the coming twenty years (Fig. 2 next page). The current situation holds the political agenda to prepare for the incoming merging of two systems in 2047, and establishment of closer relationship between neighbouring Shenzhen and Hong Kong, currently separated by the landscape of wetland and fishponds.





^ Fig. 1 Collage showing mirrored Shenzhen skyline to give an idea on the future of north-west New Territories (Source: Author, 2022).

Hong Kong / Hong Kong economy South China Morning Post

Sceptical Hong Kong oyster farmers brace themselves for Northern Metropolis plans to transform their Deep Bay village

- Proposals for IT hub, new housing leave long-time oyster farmers worried about their livelihood
- Lack of details in development blueprint has residents asking if this might be 'all talk, no action'

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Oyster farm owner Chan To-ngan (right) and son Edwin Chan at her farm in Lau Fau Shan. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

^ Fig. 3 One of many concerns over local businesses in Yuen Long and North district caused by impending development (Source: South China Morning Post, 2022).

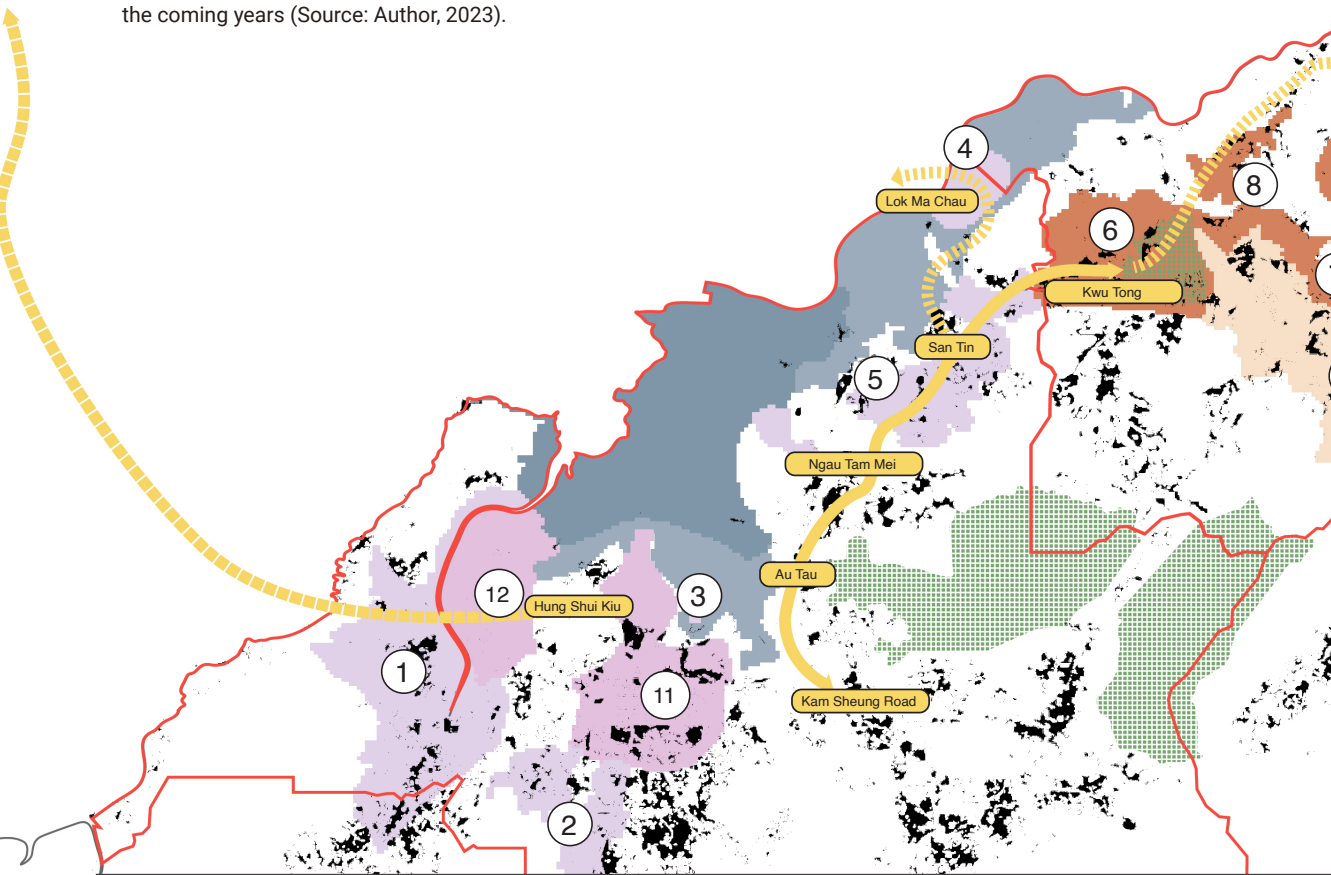
Located within the Northern Metropolis boundary are 272 recognised villages. Despite, no guarantee for the project to be realised in its full proposed capacity¹, concerns and ongoing protests² against expanding urban boundaries accompanied rural society both in the past and recent years.

Caught between multiple actors with their respective interests balanced between economic, ecological, and political implications of the proposed development, current situation reveals its complexity and the challenge in addressing concerns touching on various fields of knowledge and types of management. It, also brings attention to an urgency in considering both the ecological and cultural consequences to the project, with not only the wet-

1. Relate to official document issued on 6th of October, 2021, entitled: Northern Metropolis Development Strategy Report. <https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2021/eng/pdf/publications/Northern/Northern-Metropolis-Development-Strategy-Report.pdf>

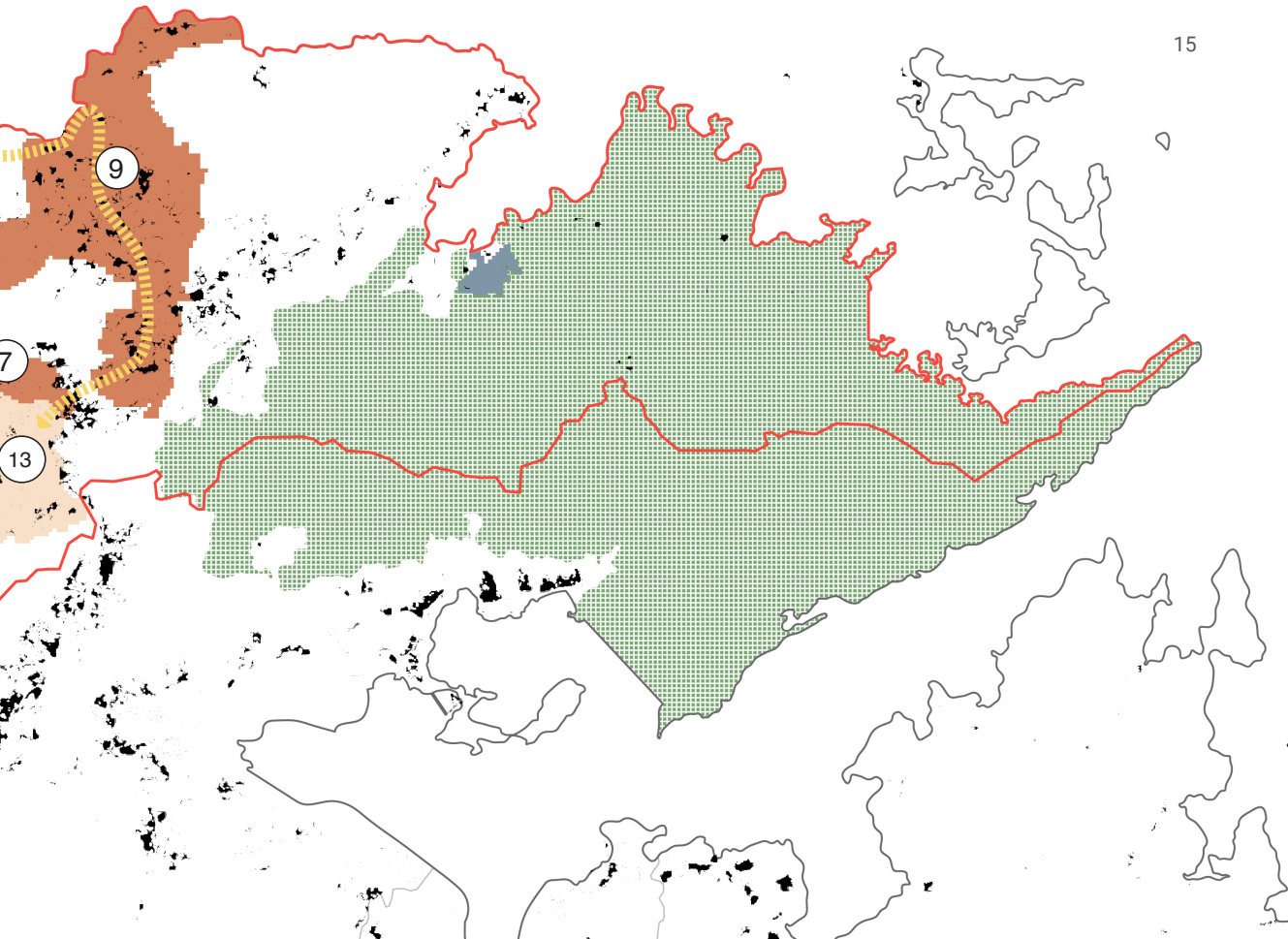
2. For example: Northeast New Territories [NENT] development, 2012 & 2014; Choi Yuen Village removal, 2014; Wang Chau Village removal, 2016; Ma Shi Po Village removal, 2019; Yuen Long Industrial Estate expansion, 2013; Lok Ma Chau Loop development, 2018; Yuen Long South development, 2020.

✓ Fig. 2 Overview of planned developed across Yuen Long and North districts in the coming years (Source: Author, 2023).




Timeline	New development	Description
<i>Yuen Long</i>		
2020-38	01 Hung Shui Kiu NDA [+ 176,000]	High density residential development with commercial and retail uses. Planned as a 'Regional Economic and Civic Hub', and provision of jobs in modern industries through 'Logistics, Enterprise and Technology Quarter' [2,5]
2024-38	02 Yuen Long South Development Area [+ 98,700]	Residential, commercial and industrial uses [3]
20??-??	03 Nam Sang Wai [+ 6,500]	Residential use [4]
2021-26	04 Lok Ma Chau Loop [+ population]	Innovation and Technology Park specializing in the research and development of biomedicine, chemistry, physics, engineering and artificial intelligence [1]
2025-34	05 San Tin/Lok Ma Chau Development Node* [+ population]	Creation of employment node as well as transport infrastructure development to redirect the existing traffic flow [6]
<i>North</i>		
2019-26	06 Kwu Tung North NDA [+ 131,600]	'Mixed Development Node' with a mix of residential, commercial, research and development (R&D) and agricultural uses as well as retail and services, community and government facilities and land for natural and ecological conservation [7,8]
2019-26	07 Fanling North NDA [+ 95,100]	Mix of residential, retail and services and agricultural uses, community and government facilities. Shek Wu San Tsuen area will be developed into the Central Park with social welfare and recreational facilities in the vicinity, forming the civic core of the area. The north-western portion of the NDA is planned for various uses, including logistics facilities, bus depots, public heavy goods vehicle park and expansion for Shek Wu Hui Sewerage Treatment Works [9]
2021-??	08 Man Kam To Development Corridor [+ 200,000]	Mixture of residential development, enterprise and technology park, and governmental facilities among others [10]
2019-26	09 New Territories North New Town* [+ 200,000]	Mixture of various land uses including residential, commercial, science park, industrial, government, institution or community, agricultural, open spaces, green belt, etc. were proposed [10]
Expansion of existing development		
<i>Yuen Long</i>		
	11 Tin Shui Wai New Town	
	12 Yuen Long New Town	
<i>North</i>		
	13 Fanling/Sheung Shui New Town	

*North New Territories New Town and San Tin/Lok Ma Chau Development Node are two projects within the Strategic Growth Areas proposed under "Hong Kong 2030+: Towards a Planning Vision and Strategy Transcending 2030" (Hong Kong 2030+ Study) to meet Hong Kong's long-term housing, economic and social needs [10]






Timeline

- 20??-?? 13 Hong Kong Shenzhen Western Rail Link
- 2025-34 14 Northern Link
- 20??-?? 15 Northern Link Eastward Extension
- 20??-?? 16 Northern Link Spur Line

 Proposed metro station

Natural environment

-  Conservation area
-  Wetland area
-  Wetland buffer zone



land and fishpond landscape to be affected but also local communities. Despite many rural residents recognizing the economic opportunity in land exchange, and hence the economic profit coming from proposed development, many express their concern about the potential loss of ancestral land and cultural heritage, equally with closure of local businesses and dispersion of communities relying on the use of the land both economically as well as a way sustaining village relations (Fig. 3).

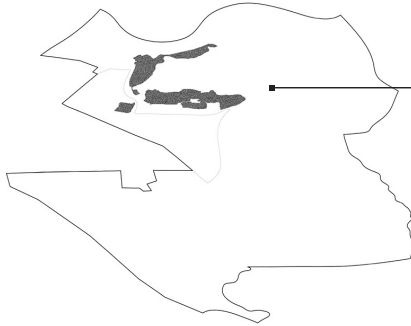
90% of the villages in Hong Kong are located in within 5km radius from closest New Town. Vast majority of villages in Yuen Long and North districts, due to fast expanding boundaries of towns, are located on the edges, or otherwise fringes of existing Yuen Long, Tin Shui Wai, Sheung Shui and Fanling New Towns, or will find themselves in that position once new urban concentrations will rise across the area in coming decades. Villages located on the fringes of nine New Towns formed between 1950s and 90s, have mostly adapted to contemporary life, however, with regard to old customs and beliefs. Due to the conventional understanding of 'traditional' society, followed since the establishment of the Colony, their still active community has been ideologically trapped between modernity and 'tradition', yet only partially fitting in a definition of either, with many practices and festivities taking today more of a contemporary form. The in-between condition resulting from continuous adaptations and transitions over time, is responsible for a fluid, constantly evolving character. This state found a consequence in lack of their position within the countryside conservation debate which limits its current efforts to so-called green enclaves, which in contrast to fringe villages portrays the ideals of 'traditional' village through its unchanged architecture. At the same time the condition had its effect on the and the current rural-urban dynamic, binding urban and rural communities in the relationship full of dependencies and discord, and as this paper will explain their identities. Their liquid state, constantly reshaped through the context, and hence their cultural persistence and future, along with the potentials which might come from their role as an interpreter between many realities of Hong Kong, has yet to be better understood in research.

This study aims to revisit the concept of 'traditional society' in the context of fluid territory and, through its re-interpretation, establish potential values and speculative functions of the future village concerning local communities' perspectives and experiences. In doing so, it aims to balance economic and social development with cultural persistence and countryside conservation. To make this study possible and meaningful, this paper takes the reading resolution of Yuen Long New Town and concentrates on Tung Tau Alliance villages in its direct vicinity as a case study, and design response in one of its villages, the Shan Pui Tsuen (Fig. 4).



Micro - Design response

Shan Pui Tsuen



Meso - Site investigation

Tung Tau Village Alliance

7 villages



Shap Pat Heung

Exo - Context research

*Yuen Long
(district division)*

155 villages

Deep Bay

Yuen Long



HK Airport

Lantau Island

Victoria Harbour

*Hong Kong
Island*

These considerations guide the research proposal by asking:

What strategies can be employed to facilitate the persistence of liquid cultures by maintaining continuity with the past, while embracing modernity and avoiding deconstruction of rural society, through reimagination and revaluation of the future function of the village in rural-urban dynamic?

This question becomes a consideration of both countryside conservation practices and the position of the villages in the rural-urban mutual dependency and discord relationship. This study begins with a discussion on the potential new interpretations of 'traditional society' and 'tradition' as a classification system for protecting active traditional communities, asking:

What is tradition in the fluid context with many possible futures?

and,

How can the cultural preservation be re-interpreted from cataloguing the past to a progress and future driven practice?

In efforts to make sense of the process of current and future transitions in rural society, the study asks how the function of the village unit on the fringe of Yuen Long New Town changed over time and what future function can it hold. Considering current countryside conservation practices in Hong Kong, it then goes on to answer what role architecture plays in heritage and cultural conservation beyond the protection and revitalisation of architecturally significant structures by proposing a design framework set in one of example villages - Shan Pui Tsuen.

Theoretical underpinning

The theoretical underpinning follows firstly, a thematic flow which explains the position through which this study understands *tradition* and *village*, as primary concepts discussed. It also provides a backbone for the methodological approach, specifying particular aspects of otherwise possible to interpret in many different ways the idea of a village to be used as a reference in measuring change. It also provides an overview of the current approaches to countryside conservation in Hong Kong and their application in the northwest territory. Secondly, it follows conceptual flow providing a framework for reading mentioned changes and transitions within the studied context.

Thematic - Tradition & Village

The general public and researchers often associate the idea of “tradition” or “traditional society” with the classical architectural style of rural housing in the context of Hong Kong equated with pre-modernization and preceding introduction of the Small House Policy and consequent change in overall village aesthetic. The mainstream idea of tradition is captured in a set of characteristics which define its continuity in the way of life before the Lease, sharing of a place of origin and rural customs by the villagers. “The year 1898 has assumed significance in the interpretation of the shared native place (Chi. xiangxa) by the inhabitants” (Chun 2000, in Hayes 2012 p.176) – the village, which in the context of the north-west has changed dramatically over the last few decades. The communities inhabiting fringe villages, described in the introduction, are referred to in this paper as ‘liquid cultures’, building on Bauman’s (2000) liquid society, - emphasizing social group, which beliefs, values, customs and social organisation evolve in response to changing circumstances. The plural form aims to highlight that despite the collective, due to the scope limitations of this study, unified description of the rural fringe village in this paper, the values and life outlooks differ between individual villages and their members.

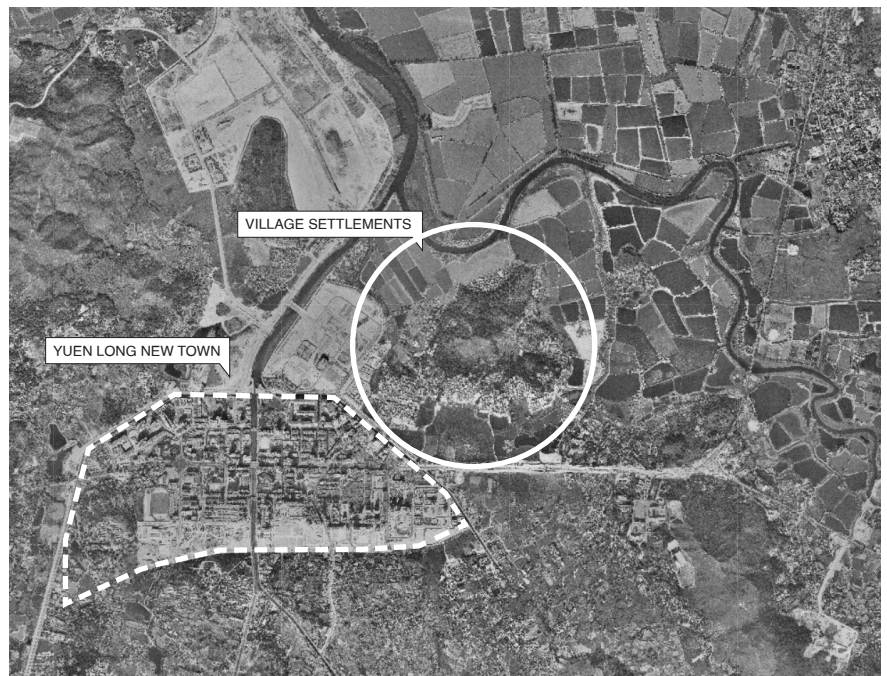
Before the Lease, the village boundary would be clearly defined with the surrounding walls, mainly used against the inter-village raids. In today’s rural landscape in northwest NT, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish one village boundary from another and even a village from the Town boundary (Fig. 5). However, this paper recognizes the village as a system organizing the social and cultural aspects of the community rather than its physical outline on the city map - hence, its functional characteristics, and the role it plays in sustaining the community.

Conceptual

As defined by the UNESCO glossary (2022), “conservation of cultural heritage refers to the measures taken to extend the life of cultural heritage while strengthening a transmission of its significant heritage messages and values.” Holtorf (2014) contrasts the idea of loss aversion, providing an alternative outlook on current approaches to rural revitalisation and conservation, by suggesting that the “superiority of maintaining the status quo of the cultural heritage,” obstructs the potential of creating new values and meanings within the community. In that sense, the “attempts to perpetuate pre-existing relations, in the rural society, rather than welcoming transition, can render the social more rather than less precarious, depending on the context” (Littlejohn 2021). DeSilvey (2019) proposes a complementary approach, whereby the potential of loss generated through the transformation of the circumstance, and hence the community group, is seen as “generative and emancipatory...,” and “...” facilitates the emergence of new values, attachments and forms of significance...,” necessary to “...respond to new



1963



1982

^ Fig. 5 Merging of town and country boundary on example of Yuen Long New Town and Tung Tau Village alliance (Source: Google Earth, Author 2023).



2023

realities.” This approach becomes a suggestion towards an active method of cultural preservation and hence, an approach toward response in the territory where constant physical, social and economic re-shaping influence its cultural dimensions.

Considering the complexity of the town-country relationship and the multiple social, political and economic interdependencies which conditioned the current shape and form of the rural physical and metaphysical landscape we can observe and be conscious of how possible locally applied solutions will or can be designed to reflect on larger scales. At the same time the current rural-urban interdependency and ‘spontaneous self-organisation’ (Waldrop, 1993) in the form of land, accommodation and resource exchange influence today’s social dynamic of both groups, which “transcend themselves, acquiring collective properties such as life, thought, and purpose that they might never have possessed individually,” (Waldrop, 1993) forming a complex system. Waldrop also highlights that such systems are constantly adapting and hence, complementing with DeSilvey’s line of thought constantly re-create their values.

Scales of engagement with complex systems can be interpreted through Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological system theory as micro, meso, exo and macro scales, which can become helpful in choosing the reading resolution of a complex condition and vice versa the scale of application and its repercussions on a larger system. However, the system was designed to trace human development as influenced by external influences it can also

serve to understand the development and progression of community and its cultural development.

Additionally, Ostrom's work (1990) provides insights into the concept of commoning and the governance of common resources. The author highlights the approach towards successful commons management outlined in eight principles: clearly defined boundaries; proportional equivalence between benefits and costs; collective choice arrangements; monitoring; graduated sanctions; conflict resolution mechanisms, and recognition of the right to self-organize. All which will become evident in proposed framework.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, including contextual historical analysis, conceptual and speculative research. The historical analysis focuses on capturing circumstances which created demands and, in effect, the need for response (adaptation) among the rural community. The demand is described on a macro (Hong Kong) and exo level (Yuen Long). Its response is read on a meso-level, here understood as a case study of Tung Tau Alliance villages, located within the Yuen Long district. The demand-response approach allows reading of the adaptation process and in relation to Chun's idea of the village, takes its function as a measurement unit of transition. In doing so, it hopes to understand the ability to respond (adapt) and understand how fast did such circumstances reflect in the life of the ordinary rural folk at the time and to what degree current practices and identities among rural villages on the fringe of town were preconditioned by the urban expansion and changing town-country dynamic. In doing so, it hopes to create a base for speculation on possible future functions of the village within the town-country dynamic. Supported through a conceptual backbone, it brings a new light to understanding the degree of relevance in current conservation practices and reinterpretations of ideas such as one of a traditional society. The historical and ethnographic research overlap through conducted interviews. The speculation of village futures in the fluid context is then concluded with the proposed design framework for the mutual benefit of two groups in discourse, in line with the proposed theoretical underpinning.

Methods

This study employs a range of academic research methods: historical re-

search, ethnographic analysis, literature review, stakeholder analysis and interviews, and quantitative data analysis. Historical research examines the region's historical context and events that have influenced the current rural condition. Ethnographic methods involve observation, interviews, and context analysis to understand the cultural practices and social dynamics within rural communities. A literature review is conducted to identify and analyse existing theories and frameworks related to cultural preservation and rural revitalization. Stakeholder analysis and interviews are used to understand the perspectives and interests of relevant stakeholders, employing the snowball effect to identify additional participants. Quantitative data analysis is conducted to analyse numerical data collected during the research process, using statistical techniques and data visualization.

Limitations

While this approach generates meaningful and measurable outcomes, the results may not be fully generalizable and when applied to other location needs re-assessment to fit the particular context. Moreover, the study's focus on transitions within rural society in response to urban expansion and interventions in rural interests may not capture the full complexity of the social, economic, and political dynamics at play in the region. However, the above methodology provides a comprehensive approach to studying the research question in a way that is both theoretically grounded and empirically informed and can be replicated as a valuable framework in studying similar conditions in other village clusters across Hong Kong and South China.

Chapter 01 | Meaning of *tradition* in modern society

'East' and 'West' - disparities between two of Hong Kong's rural realities

Some researchers and most urbanities in Hong Kong have built a utopian vision of a village-scape in the New Territories (NT), based on the idea of 'traditional society' as detached from the realities of modern life and its lure. Despite the isolation of these groups from urban life in the first half of the Lease, most of the rural society adapted and profited from the urban-industrialisation, that occurred in post-war Hong Kong. Positioning 'tradition' on a par with the past, and consequently in contrast with progress and contemporary living have possibly two explanations. Firstly, following A. Chun's (2000) line of thought, the original policy of non-interference with 'elements' of tradition - rites, customs, beliefs and lineage institutions, led to a common perception of such elements as defining what was understood as a 'traditional society' in the very first years of the Lease, and as follows the rural in general, unchangeably for decades to come. Most of the urban population, including the authorities did not have much knowledge about ongoing rural affairs (Hayes 2012), up until the 1970s when two groups would come closer, at least geographically. Secondly, together with the development of New Towns, the Country Park Ordinance (1976), which intended to protect the countryside and improve outdoor and recreational amenities for the urban population, positioned rural as a compensation zone for stuffiness found in the city, and further conceptually isolated two worlds creating two images in contrast to one another. At the same time rural has become a zone of compensation for elements in deficit in the urban centres: space, nature, solitude and more commonly land and cheaper accommodation.

Currently, two realities of Hong Kong's countryside can be distinguished between, previously mentioned New Town's villages, on the fringe of New Town developments, intersecting economically and socially with urbanities, geographically distant green enclaves in country parks vicinity. In the case of the later, remoteness, complex geography and low transport accessibility spared these settlements from urban development, simultaneously becoming a reason behind their de-population. Due to environmental protection policies, land in or in the vicinity of protected areas restricted implementation of even the smallest improvements to village infrastructure, in fear of progressive development. With a lack of clearance to build additional roads and havens, even the repair of e.g., burial grounds became an administrative rather than custom-related affair, leaving green enclaves, at least in terms of their physical appearances in a similar state to one described by Sir James Lockhart¹ in first report written on New Territories in 1899.

1. Sir James Lockhart was a prominent British colonial administrator who played a significant role in the development of rural Hong Kong during the early 20th century. He served as the District Officer of the New Territories, a region encompassing the rural areas of Hong Kong, from 1899 to 1906. Lockhart's tenure witnessed significant changes in the rural landscape and governance of the New Territories.

To protect flora and fauna of special interest, certain customs were restricted or curtailed (Hayes 2012, p.81). In effect, many villagers starting in the 1960s, tired from difficulties presented by constrained life in the secluded village out-migrated to the city or abroad looking for new economic opportunities. Dispersion of the community and radical break with the previous lifestyle, left many green enclaves either deserted or largely under-populated with presently only a handful of full-time residents. Early relocation of green enclave society allowed for the preservation of village-scape in a form integral to the mainstream idea of 'traditional society' and hence to become an ample study case of indigenous life of San On (broader Hong Kong area) district in pre-colonial days, before the reach of modernization - past and present condition of green enclaves have been generously covered by historians and anthropologists, and in recent years hosted multiple rural revitalisation projects.

On the other hand, the gradual shift from traditional economies with residents "enticed" by the "attractions of an urban-industrial society," to manufacturing industries (the 1950s), shift from "unchanging appearances of limestone and brick houses" to uniform concrete three storey housing (1970s) due to policy and economy change, and social structure extending far beyond "single-lineage village community," allowed for communities concentrated around dense urban areas to profit from contemporary way of life (Hayes, 2012). Hence, creating a current image of settlements on the fringe with New Towns, which no longer fully reflects the romanticized image of 'traditional society'. A century of the 'rural' as an equivalent to rejection of contemporary life paired with integration of this group, economically and socially, with most of the villagers working or studying in the city, modern architecture and a far less romantic entourage, painted a picture of somewhat in between society – between rural and urban, tradition and progress. Visiting those threshold communities, one might still observe the regard for past customs, religious beliefs and social organization, bringing a question of whether the 'tradition' has been abandoned or rather the current condition is an effect of a fast-adapting mentality and cultural adaptation, or perhaps the very idea of tradition requires a re-interpretation.

Countryside Conservation efforts in Hong Kong – a case of Lai Chi Wo

In recent years there has been an increased interest in countryside conservation practices both in government (establishment of Countryside Conservation Office in 2018), and academic research bodies. Most funded projects concentrate in the northeast NT, mentioned green enclaves, predominantly in Plover Cove and Sai Kung East country park areas. Successful proposals focus on introduction of eco-tourism and living

museum concepts to allow for new economic activities in the village, re-population and preservation of built and cultural heritage. The exemplary project launched in 2013 is the Lai Chi Wo revitalisation programme (Fig. 6). Vivifying Lai Chi Wo: Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme took a depopulated village as a case study in initiating a management system towards biodiversity conservation and cultural resources to create an educational hub and job opportunities to sustain the local economy. The project allows for the re-settlement of the population into the village, and the revival of agricultural practices together with businesses oriented towards 'bed and breakfast' combined with the educational experience provided for mainly local visitors coming from urban areas for weekend trips.

The Lai Chi Wo project works well to educate urbanities and interested foreign visitors about the Hakka minority as well as to bring local population in touch with their past. However, this paper argues that while successful in the sphere of education and biological restoration it focuses primarily on capturing the past condition rather than speculating on the future of rural communities which are still active in Hong Kong. Here, it needs to be mentioned that many of Lai Chi Wo residents are not the original villagers and have moved there to re-settle the village attracted by the opportunities of a simpler life. Therefore, the program has been successful in revitalising and making use of heritage sites, adapting them to new economies and users, and answering contemporary needs. While the program creates many opportunities in that sense, it can be seen as appealing mainly to urban resident needs rather than responding to the question of preservation of rural community and hence cultural heritage, as well as the future of rural population in Hong Kong at large. Whereas the key elements of the strategy such as restoration of historic buildings, improvement of infrastructure and community engagement can be easily applied to any other site in need of revival, the core driver for the economic prospect of the village which is based on the eco-tourism and non-village participants is unique to this particular site. Initiatives as such, rely on external visitors, who on the other hand are driven by the scenic character of isolated locations as a primary factor in visiting areas in which projects like the Lai Chi Wo programme are set (HKUMed, 2020). Furthermore, narration of revitalisation projects around the unique feature of the settlement such as organic turmeric and ginger farming in Lai Chi Wo or coral and shell kiln, Hakka customs etc. in other locations, creates both a limitation in replicability of proposed schemes to other locations and presents a danger of celebrating and protecting only selected aspects of Hong Kong culture.

Hence, the project's framework is not applicable to described fringe villages, as despite (in some cases) being located in vicinity of conservation zones such as Nam Sang Wai wetland area, they are mostly polluted and their scenery disrupted by many often illegally placed storage facilities and waste disposal, and presence of brownfield sites (Fig. 7). At the same time the main difference lies in still active community which can be seen as an argument for its preservation, however at the same time creating



^ Fig. 6 Lai Chi Wo village is located in Plover Cove Country Park's beautiful scenery with many hike trails, and attractions - the village being one of them (Source: <https://www.hku.hk/press>, 17 Nov 2021).



^ Fig. 7 Brownfields near the Shan Pui Tsuen fishpond site (Source: Author 2023).

complex situation, difficult to navigate by the researchers. This can be seen as a possible reason for lack of such strong interest in revitalisation and preservation of fringe villages communities, along with previously mentioned lack of single-lineage population, modern aesthetics (Fig.8) and modernization of many customs. Proposals such as Lai Chi Wo are characterised by strong interference from the side of the organizing body which in active community with strong representation might be unwelcomed. In that sense, green enclaves can be seen as almost empty canvas with more forgiving context and hence ripe opportunities for researchers and students to intervene.

Despite attempts to involve the community by introducing participatory programs and activities, such projects often rely on external agents for their continued existence and tend to adopt a soft top-down management approach. In the case of Lai Chi Wo, it has been observed that project initiators, such as institutions, NGOs, or research groups, face challenges in disengaging from the project. The villagers perceive them as a crucial organising force, making it difficult for the project to transition to a model-driven solely by community participation. To address this issue, it is worth considering alternative approaches that empower participants from the outset and minimize the reliance on external managerial control, beyond the first phases on the project where the financial input and external knowledge in management might be needed. Such approaches would entail limited involvement from external institutions, focusing primarily on monitoring and conflict resolution. In this scenario, the community itself would assume the role of generating ideas and driving the project, with the external institution providing necessary administrative or logistical support. In the north-west territories, where rural leadership and self-organization are prominent, there is potential for these alternative schemes to succeed and be led primarily by the community, rather than being heavily managed externally. By fostering a greater sense of community ownership and initiative, these schemes have the potential to establish sustainable and self-sustaining projects in the region.

The same framework cannot, however, be applied in the New Town fringe villages which firstly might miss the same driving force of scenic factor and strong narration of present communities as 'attractive' for the external visitor. In parallel, the northwest is a consideration of conservation and protection rather than revitalisation per se, if fringe village communities are seen as adaptations of traditional society. At the same time, such settlements retained their strong political presence and are less likely to see the need for revitalisation projects or application of conservation techniques for the management of heritage sites as expressed in interviews. Hence, the approaches to ensure cultural continuity in the northwest do need to target the current values and function of the village in the eyes of its residents, to recognize the ownership and leadership of the residents over the project, rather than that of institution coming forward with a proposal.

> Fig. 8 View from Wong Uk village (Source: Village resident, April 2023).



'Traditional society'

According to Sir James Lockhart (1899), the New Territories in Hong Kong, influenced by Chinese culture, were believed to have remained unchanged for several centuries. This perception of the rural area being stuck in tradition was further reinforced by the stark contrast between the lack of basic infrastructure such as sanitation, electricity, and transportation in comparison to the urban City of Victoria. Additionally, there was a level of suspicion and opposition to the colonial government. Although the landscape of the New Territories undergone significant changes, this perception of tradition versus progress remained unchanged. Today, such mentioned perceptions shape the priorities of current countryside conservation efforts, favouring aesthetically pleasing villages with built heritage in corresponding to the 'old times' style.

The concept of tradition, particularly in this context, tends to be associated with the past and is often resistant to progress or modernization. This perspective exposes a gap in understanding cultural evolution and overlooks the notion that tradition is an ongoing process, continuously shaped by present and future actions. Hayes notes that despite new administrative developments in the 1950s and mentioned improvement in services which would come much later than originally planned, the rural society itself would become the catalyst for change, gradually adjusting to a new awareness of modern life and what it could offer (2012, p. 129).

In the historical and present-day context, the government equally with independent organisations offer protection of traditional practices mainly through financial assistance (in the past through the Fisheries and Agriculture Association and Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association, today through a donation from NGOs such as Hong King Bird Watching Society or Countryside Conservation fund Scheme funding revitalisation and research project in villages). Similarly, land ownership policies favouring the indigenous, rural privilege protect rural interests. However, regardless, many rural folks both in the past and today opt to abandon land-based practices associated with the 'traditional' way of living and settle outside of the village, or as in the case of land rights policies make use of the privilege in unintended by the policymakers way. It is important not to mistake apparent disregard for one's tradition as ignorance on the part of rural folk choosing to leave village life behind, but rather a pragmatic adaptation to the changing economic and social climate in his or her context, driven by the aspiration to improve one's livelihood. As such it gives an insight that each transformation in what is commonly referred to as a "traditional society," with significant heritage and cultural value today, is an adaptive response to a changing social and economic landscape in Hong Kong from mainly the 1950s to the present day.

Considering the above, and in the context of liquid cultures the 'tradition' can be defined as equivalent to progress, despite its usual perception

as positioned in or referring to the past. Such thinking can be explained when looking at all the traditions and customs we currently classify as worth preserving and as 'traditional' practices, as past adaptations to its context. Thus, what is deemed worthy of preservation and labelled as "traditional" has, at one point, been a response and adaptation to changing circumstances and the realities of people's lives. In that regard, despite similarities between different communities and village clusters, the tradition as defined in the time and space differs from village to village, and not in the sense of differences in the practice, or festive decorations, but by what meanings and functions are in said time attached to village unit by people living in it. As Chun (2000) suggests, it is a reflection of the struggle for existence. And one which can be observed through the changing function of the village - described in the following chapter.

Through re-interpretation of a common perception of 'tradition' we can see the communities inhabiting the fringe villages as equally 'worth' preserving. At the same time the act of preservation can allow for loss with some of the practices in need of change of adaptation in order to allow for the community to stay relevant in the modern context and in mutual relationship between two inter-crossing realities of urban and rural. While treating change, as a adaptation and seeking for new values in response to demands created by the surroundings, new approach towards active preservation can be created. Whereby the change allows for the community to continue, despite certain modifications, their practices and beliefs, and hence allow for the continuity and persistence of the group.

Author to village elderly sitting outside of the village gate:

How did the development of YOHO shopping mall and highrise complex facing the village affect your life?

Village elder:

We like it! It casts a shadow on our village so it's not so hot in the summer!

The proposed interpretation of the tradition has been inspired through conversation with the villagers. It has come as a surprise to discover that despite strong regard for intangible heritage - the organisation system, beliefs, religious and cultural practices and sense of identity, even the elderly of the village would have come with an agreement with the change - shifting the initial assumptions of this paper to its current form.

Chapter 02 | Development in its own right: changing function of a village unit



⤴ The meandering Yuen Long Creek passes through the swampy region before flowing into Deep Bay (Source: Poon, Siu-chee, Elsa, in: "Land utilisation of the marshes north of Tung Tau Tsuen" [unpublished, 1959]), via University of Hong Kong Libraries).

⤴ A distant view of Shan Pui Tsuen in Yuen Long (Source: Kwan, Ki-tai, in: "An economic and social study of Tung Tau, Yuen Long" [unpublished, 1959], via University of Hong Kong Libraries).



^ The fish ponds in front of Shan Pui Tsuen of Yuen Long (Source: Kwan, Ki-tai, in: "An economic and social study of Tung Tau, Yuen Long" [unpublished, 1959], via University of Hong Kong Libraries).

< Fish ponds, Tung Tau, Yuen Long (Source: Kwan, Ki-tai, in: "An economic and social study of Tung Tau, Yuen Long" [unpublished, 1959], via University of Hong Kong Libraries).





^ The fishpond next to the Shan Pui Tsuen village in Yuen Long (Source: Author, 28 March 2023).

< The same fishponds while drained from water reveals fishpond silt (Source: Author, 9 March 2023).





^ Shan Pui Tsuen fisherman at work,
harvesting fish (Source: Author, 2023).

< Fish from local fishpond is transported
to markets in Yuen Long and Kawloon.
(Source: Author, 2023).







階泰

碑引玉來

青連紫曳

福接春迎

四季平安

全年順景家

引玉





長者康樂園地
安全守則



Fitness Corner for the Elderly
Safety Guide

1. 每日康樂活動，應與每日例程，配合時間，按時進行。
2. 活動前應先做暖身運動，活動後應做伸展運動。
3. 活動時應注意天氣，如遇雷雨，應停止活動。
4. 活動時應注意地面，如遇濕滑，應停止活動。
5. 活動時應注意器材，如遇損壞，應停止使用。
6. 活動時應注意他人，如遇碰撞，應停止活動。
7. 活動時應注意身體，如遇不適，應停止活動。
8. 活動時應注意環境，如遇危險，應停止活動。
9. 活動時應注意秩序，如遇混亂，應停止活動。
10. 活動時應注意安全，如遇意外，應停止活動。

1. All the fitness equipment in the Corner should be used in an upright and appropriate posture. Do always, consult a medical professional beforehand.
2. Warm up for 10 to 15 minutes before using the fitness equipment and do it for 10 minutes of post-exercise relaxation.
3. Be well hydrated when you are engaged in the fitness activities.
4. Be aware of the fitness equipment before using it. Do not use any equipment if you find it damaged or if it is not safe to use.
5. Be aware of the fitness equipment before using it. Do not use any equipment if you find it damaged or if it is not safe to use.
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康樂及文化事務署
Leisure and Cultural Services Department

Evolution of village function

Above the village unit, the Cantonese term *heung* represents a traditional grouping of villages that collaborate to provide mutual support through self-managing local groups. In the subdistrict of Sha Pat Heung in Yuen Long, there exists the Tung Tau Village Alliance, which originated from predominantly the same clan lineage. It is one of the largest village clusters on the edge of Yuen Long New Town, located near its centre and the old Yuen Long market. The presence of these settlements can be traced back to the 1866 map of San On County. The Tung Tau Tsuen, along with Nam Pin Wai, Choi Uk Tsuen, Ying Lung Wai, Shan Pui Tsuen, Wong Uk Tsuen, and Tai Wai Tsuen, collectively ally seven villages surrounding a small hill. Among these villages, six face the Yuen Long MTR station and YOHO Mall shopping centre, while Shan Pui faces the Nam Sang Wai wetland conservation area. The Tung Tau Village Alliance comprises approximately six thousand registered individuals, with the majority falling within the productive age range of 25 to 45 years old. In the past, these allied villages collaborated in cultural activities such as lion dances during important festivals in Yuen Long, including the Tin Hua festival. However, the current relationship among the villages has diminished, and collaborations occur infrequently.

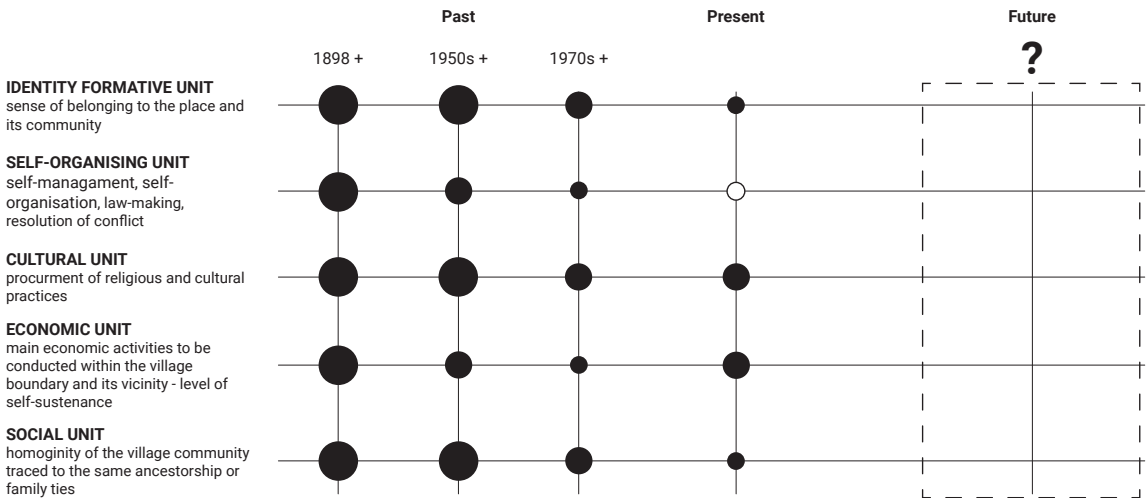
During the formation of New Towns from the 1960s to the 2000s, rural community leadership played a significant role in shaping identities within these urban developments. The amalgamation of urban and rural elements driven by economic and administrative factors has resulted in substantial shifts in the social fabric and organizational structure of these villages. Since 1898, the rural population of the New Territories has undergone a remarkable transformation from a more traditional way of life to a lifestyle in the fringe villages that increasingly resembles that of urban areas, as evidenced by the rising prosperity reflected in increasingly modern housing and expensive cars in village parking lots.

To analyse the changing function of the village, it is important to consider key observations related to the evolving role of village land, which shifted from a subsistence-based economy to profit generation. Its changing role can be also noted through transitions in the level of protection of community interests and its representation to the external society, degree of self-organization and self-management, as well as the social structure and its distribution within the village. Additionally, the physical and conceptual boundaries of the village and its position within the dynamic relationship between urban and rural areas play a significant role in understanding these changes.

While various transitions occurred in rural society over time, the most visible and measurable transitions have been observed since the 1950s, when the New Territories became crucial for the city's development. Therefore, this chapter primarily focuses on the period from the second half of the

20th century to the present, while providing an initial overview of the Un Long (Yuen Long) area during the early colonial days as a reference point for comprehending the scale of adaptation that has taken place since the 1890s.

● ● ● level of priority
○ not applicable



First Year (1898)

"Until urbanization came to the New Territories of Hong Kong, the area consisted of settlements made up of either a single group or several groups of people all of whom in one group traced their descent from a common ancestor. In English literature, these were referred to as either villages or lineages" (David Faure in Hayes 2000 p.5). The New Territory upon its lease, was an unexplored, "...primarily agricultural district, consisting of broad valleys, and many pockets of farmland among the hills...with only few market towns..." the most important located in Yuen Long and Tai Po "...dealing with rice, oil and samshu"¹ (Lockhart 1898), separated from the Colony by a chain of hills, bays and different outlooks on life. James S. Lockhart, following initial inspection of the land in 1899, would write about the great difference between mainly Chinese migrant workmen, living in much like today crowded conditions in the City of Victoria (today Hong Kong island) and Kowloon, and ninety thousand, man and women, settled as long as 900 years ago, and spread across around 700 villages, counting

1. Liquor distilled from rice or millet grains.

between fifty to one hundred people each, often clustered in village complexes (Hayes 2012, p.6).

In the first half of the lease rural society was characterised by a high degree of self-organisation and self-management, relying on a clear social structure and land distribution system, with each lineage managed by its managers, and the village by the elders and a headman (Hayes 2001, p.13). Despite changing the status of privately owned land from freehold to leasehold, which required payment of crown rent to the government (DiStefano & Lee 2002, p.84), in practice the lease would not interfere with the independence of rural way of living. The people were promised their rights not to be affected and local customs not interfered with. The villages and sub-districts were left alone with their leaders, and only district-level officers were elected to guard mainly land administration duties, where land ownership policies continued to follow Chinese customs and laws, as well as accepted issued documentation in the first half of the lease. Thanks to the vast and fertile plains in the north-west, the village life in Un Long" was determined by three rice-yielding seasons, in summer, autumn and winter" (Hayes 1962), and relied on the hand-to-mouth subsistent economy, with support of firewood and grass being sold in the city. This lifestyle allowed for enough food from the farm, with a tendency to humble living conditions but large sums being spent on social events and ceremonies.

At this point, the conceptual boundary of the village aligned with that of the physical one. The common rural folk would not leave their village for most of their life if ever, and hence all the activities and work would be performed within the village boundary or its vicinity. The village characterized by a high degree of self-organization would provide a sense of belonging and identity to the community, as well as serve as a primary social and economic unit. The village will also act as a law-making entity with heungs and village elders settling the disputes, as well as procuring the religious and cultural practices.

End of land practice as a form of survival (> the 1950s)

The first two decades after the war were focused on improving the services, preparing grounds for later land development, modernization and opening twenty-one country parks. All of which, contributed to a decline in previously dominant subsistence rice farming and multiple re-settlements. This decade marked a major shift from what historians would consider a traditional Chinese society in Hong Kong and its current shape.

Previously village matters would be addressed through consultation with

village elders or village managers. Up until the 1940s the village, village alliance and the *hueng*, would be responsible for self-support and self-organization in rural areas. Apart from the political and economic support, villages would form *yeuks* (alliances), in the past mainly to exchange natural resources, but also, similarly to the 20th century to perform various religious customs collectively. In 1948 Rural Committees were established which would act as a spokesperson for rural interests and hence establish a closer relationship between the rural and urban authorities. This places the rural population in a favourable position and allowed them to voice their interests, especially in the coming decades when their land would become needed for development. In the mid-50s, it became a goal for the current District Commissioner to improve current conditions across NT, providing banking and postal services, sanitation with improved water supplies, along with provision of additional educational facilities, especially primary schools (e.g., Yan Hing School in Shan Pui). The practice of village removals and re-settlements due to public works became a commonplace event (Hayes 2012; p. 74). Before the completion of improvement works, many decided to opt out of rural poverty which meant the fall of rice farming in the area.

This was a response to as always varied reasons, however, the majority of them were concentrated around the social and economic changes effective from Hong Kong's export-led manufacturing industry booming from the 1950s onwards. At the same time, this phenomenon has deepened the gorge between the improving quality of life, economic opportunities, and old-style living in rural areas. In the 1950s it has become virtually impossible for the common family in the New Territories, including Yuen Long to live solely from hand-to-mouth farming, and many of the families opted for several males to bring income from either city which now bore more than ever job opportunities or by emigrating abroad (Pacific Islands, UK etc.). In this situation, the responsibility for maintaining the farmland would be lied on women and girls in the villages, who soon opted for better-paid and less demanding factory jobs outside of the villages. Many of the male workers who remained in the villages during that time also followed the same pattern, following conducted interviews majority of rural folks, male and female abandoned agricultural occupation and began working in the factories. Combined with the drought in the 1960s, farming was officially unproductive and with much higher profits available in factories, not many young people would decide to continue to farm. In Yuen Long, many of the villagers would now commute to Tsuen Wan to work on the excavation works and construction, changing the village from a place of work to solely place where one would live.

Flowing masses of refugees in the late 1940s and a shift towards growing vegetable and animal domestication from subsistent rice farming transformed land use patterns and created opportunities for land owners in rural areas to sell or rent their land for benefit. From that point on, the rural society would recognize the value of the land from subsistent to profit generative through rent and sale. This shift of the function of village land would continue until today in both legal and illegal dimensions. Many

land-owners, tempted by the economic profits continue to sell or rent their plots of land for industrial uses like port back-up and storage facilities or residential development. This would be later facilitated by the appropriate land policies working in favour of indigenous rights. Deals between village managers and developers for the land exchange, often behind the back of the community, would allow for New Town borders to almost intertwine with that of the village, with its expanding border (Fig.9).

The village in the post-war period no longer served as a self-sustaining entity but started to rely on external powers such as developers and parties interested in land exchange to generate profit, and hence becomes more connected to the external world. More village folk will begin to leave the village to explore the opportunities presented in the city. The establishment of a rural committee to guard the interest of rural folk also shifts the function of the village to guard the interest of the rural community outside of its social system.

New Towns (1960s-2000s)

The process of expanding urban boundaries onto the rural territory began in Tsuen Wan-Kwai Chung from 1959-60 onwards and resulted in the New Town programme which officially began in the early 1970s. The program was a direct response to the growing population – an effect of increased life standard, equally to the inflowing migrant group from Mainland China. In total nine New Towns were built or under construction by the end of the Lease. Like in the case of other towns, Yuen Long New Town, where works began in 1977, was the expansion of the existing old rural township with a well-established town market and connecting routes. This development necessitated the removal of numerous villages, which was achieved through land resumption - a situation similar to this faced today. Under this process, agricultural or non-building holdings were taken back by the government. While previous government-built accommodation was withdrawn, villagers were financially compensated for their old buildings to construct new structures on sites provided by the government. Initially, total compensation was avoided, and the resumption process was initiated only as and when it was required. The process was often prolonged, and villagers were sometimes trapped for over a decade. As a result of resettlements on such a large scale, many traditional houses were dismantled. The resettlements were necessary to create space for the development of New Towns, and the authorities deemed it most efficient and least troublesome to build new houses for villagers. Resettlements occurred from one village area to another, with new villages being designated on the edge of New Town boundaries.

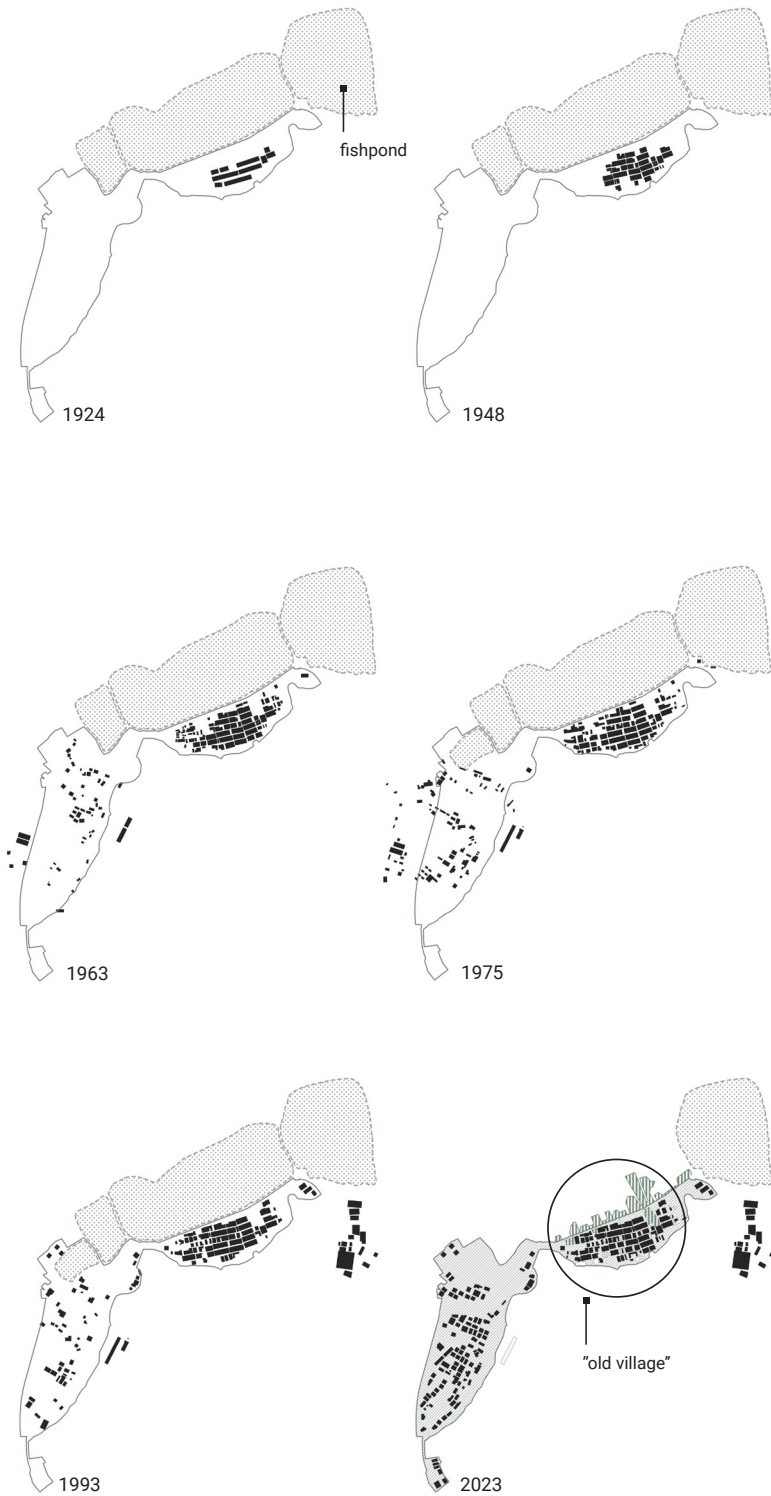
Ancestral halls and other community facilities were also rebuilt. The resettlements created concerns for the villagers on several levels. On the family level, economic concerns were prevalent, and many cases involved survival concerns due to a decrease in or loss of access to productive land with many villagers whose villages did not fall under the boundary of New Town development, however, whose life would be at the time be affected by the neighbouring large scale development could not benefit from compensation. In response, the Small House Policy was formulated in 1972 after the request for building procedures in the village to be revised by the Heung Yee Kuk (rural council), and driven by an increase in living and health standards, regulation of traditional land management practices to enable villagers development of land and to some degree the concern for the stability of village unit if not allowed for expansion. It allowed for "indigenous villagers to apply for permission to erect for himself during his lifetime a small house on a suitable site within his village" (Lands Department 2001). Hence, any male villager who can prove their descendants through a male line going back to pre-Lease of a recognized village is eligible to erect a small house (ding – literally 'male'), or in case he owns no land, can build on government land on concessionary premium, if the land is within the village surrounding, subject to size constraint, however very loose location restricted to 'village environs'¹. Before the introduction of the policy, by custom, males would build new village houses by existing village layouts on the land which if not owned already had to be bought from the government. As explained by the 1970s the price of the land, especially in the areas surrounding directly newly erected New Towns, would rise and become out of reach for many villagers, especially considering urban bidders were allowed to take part in land sold on public auction. In 1981, due to expanding need for housing, the Village Expansion Area scheme allowed for resuming land outside of village boundaries (Fig. 9).

The interventions of urban society (authorities) in NT affairs (here Hayes [2012] notes that the interventions were in, rather than for the area), became a primary driver for the rural population to adapt to changing social, political or economic context. The establishment of New Towns, from initial hardships soon created new economic opportunities. In parallel, the expansion of public transportation infrastructure allowed for easier travel and extended village economic and social prospects. Following the introduction of SHP, the villagers soon recognised the opportunity in renting houses and the village became to serve as an interface between the rural and urban residents. The position of the indigenous population as the 'host' allowed for two groups to affect, and mould one another in line of mutual dependencies and discords, taking different forms as time passed.

The process of expanding urban boundaries onto the rural territory began in Tsuen Wan-Kwai Chung from 1959-60 onwards and resulted in the New Town programme which officially began in the early 1970s. The program was a direct response to the growing population – an effect of increased

1. Village Environs is defined as an area 300ft (91.4m) from the outermost corner of the house

life standard, equally to the inflowing migrant group from Mainland China. In total nine New Towns were built or under construction by the end of the Lease. Like in the case of other towns, Yuen Long New Town, where works began in 1977, was the expansion of the existing old rural township with a well-established town market and connecting routes. This development necessitated the removal of numerous villages, which was achieved through land resumption. Under this process, agricultural or non-building holdings were taken back by the Hong Kong government. While previous government-built accommodation was withdrawn, villagers were financially compensated for their old buildings to construct new structures on sites provided by the government. Initially, total compensation was avoided, and the resumption process was initiated only as and when it was required. The process was often prolonged, and villagers were sometimes trapped for over a decade. As a result of resettlements on such a large scale, many traditional houses were dismantled. The resettlements were necessary to create space for the development of New Towns, and the authorities deemed it most efficient and least troublesome to build new houses for villagers. Resettlements occurred from one village area to another, with new villages being designated on the edge of New Town boundaries. Hence, from that point, the management of the land in relation to village function can no longer be omitted in discussions on cultural conservation due to its direct connection to the current physical, social and organizational appearance of contemporary villages in Hong Kong.



^ Fig. 9 Expanding village boundary affected by historical events in the district and Hong Kong (Source: Author, 2023).

Present - day conondrum

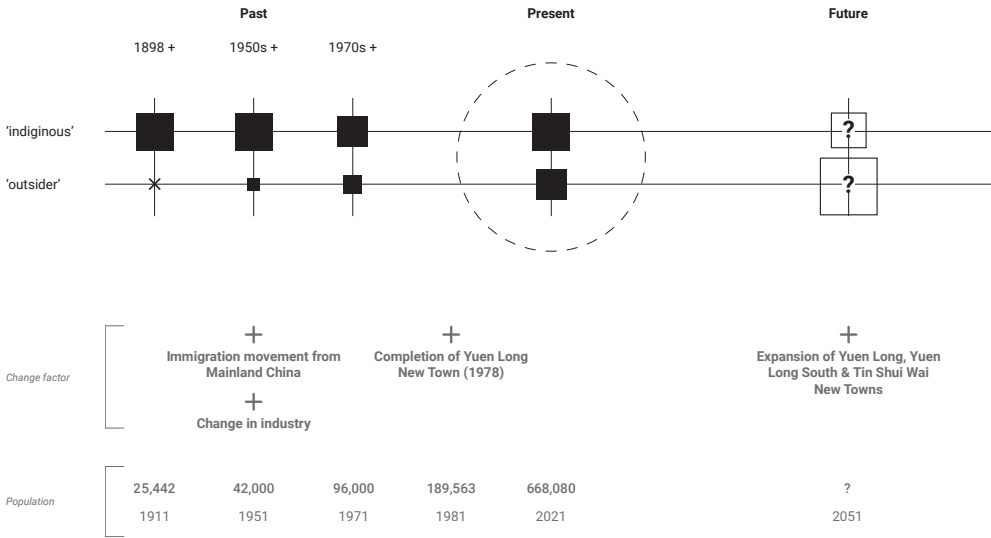
The redefinition of village land function in Tung Tau Alliance has led to an influx of urban residents. Surprisingly, this change in social structure has not been opposed by the village people; instead, it has been embraced as an economic opportunity. The effects of urbanization and industrialization have allowed rural society to become wealthier and less tied to their place of origin. The boundary of a village, in this sense, has broadened, and through family ties and ongoing land rights, it extends to cities, Western Europe, and other places worldwide.

In the current state of affairs, villagers decide to host urban residents in the village by either renting their properties to new tenants or building new houses on the peripheries of the village for rental purposes. In this way, clansmen find a new way of economic survival and, in many cases, achieve a higher economic status than the average urban resident. However, it should be noted that this phenomenon is not a rule of thumb for all villages and is observed more in villages near New Town borders. These actions are reminiscent of the 1960s when people would rent their agricultural plots to poorer migrants from Mainland China. However, as with agricultural plots, this has consequences for the social fabric of the village, as it involves the exchange of rural people for urban residents and vice versa (Fig. 10).

The villagers find themselves in a conundrum between maintaining the lineage and tight structure of the village community and pursuing economic profits. As a result, rural society has been diluted from its previously close-knit structure and has become socially intertwined with urban areas. It is likely for this reason that rental houses are mostly located on the outskirts of the village rather than in the core where the clansmen reside. Moreover, based on conducted interviews, the ability to rent such flats often depends on having good connections with an "inside" person. Furthermore, the relationship between the tenants and the village residents is kept at a distance, similar to traditional practices where newcomers had to live outside the village until they were accepted, which could take several years. Many tenants, considered outsiders, settle on the peripheries and build squatter houses on rented land.

Isolation and segregation between the original residents and newcomers, as noted by Chun (2000, p.267), are the result of a pragmatic assessment of the value of traditional social relationships in light of economic degradation. These newcomers move to suburban areas mainly due to lower rents and a "peaceful environment." However, they do not possess the same level of attachment to the area as the original residents, and they are not fully integrated into the local community. Instead, they coexist and are tolerated by the indigenous residents who profit from rent collection. According to interviews with members of this group, they acknowledge that the area has undergone significant changes in recent years, primarily due to development and increasing pollution.

■ ■ ■ population size (indicative)



^ Fig. 10 Changing ratio between original and 'outsider' resident in the village throughout time and in relation to described events on Hong Kong and Yuen Long scale (Source: Author, 2023).

Empty plots & abuse of privilege

The Small House Policy (SHP) aimed to provide more hygienic accommodation to indigenous villagers, yet recent figures show that small houses are disposed of quickly after a short term of ownership. Under the SHP, villagers can only sell their houses after the certificate of compliance is issued, and they need to apply for removing the alienation restriction. However, according to the government press release, on average, 50.6% of houses with certificates issued were disposed of from 2008 to 2017. It suggests that the original aim to offer better quality housing for indigenous villagers seems not applicable now and is perhaps only a tool to gain profit by selling these houses.

In parallel to social restructuring, the out-migration of rural, mainly male residents from villages to cities proceeded in the 1950s and through the 1960s, produced empty plots and vacant houses in the villages. The out-migration intensified in the 1980s and 1990s and produced an increasing number of empty plots and vacant houses. In Shan Pui, a village belonging to the Tung Tau Alliance, out of 219 houses in the village currently, 61 plots are inactive, leaving 23% of the village land within its close boundary underused. This paper classifies these plots into three categories (Fig. 11):

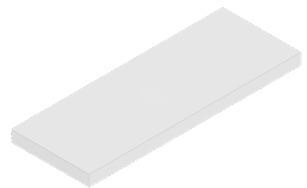
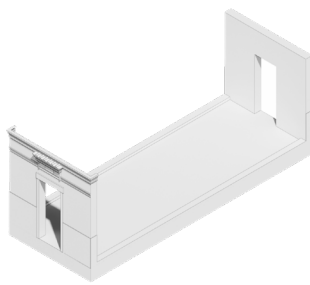
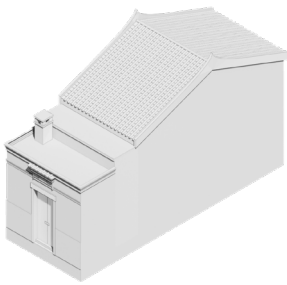
- Firstly empty plots with no structure but remaining concrete foundation,
- Secondly, plots with remaining one or two elevations,
- And thirdly, plots with complete structure, with load bearing structure. Within this category 17 plots can be recognised as grade 3 heritage sites.

Through interviews with villagers on-site, it can be drawn that the inactive plots are considered possessions of villagers who migrated abroad or moved to the city. Even in obvious cases where plots and vacant houses came to the point of complete obsolescence, there has been little interest in them, and no actions have been taken, despite the long absence of original owners. The interviews confirmed that such lack of action is largely motivated by owners who cannot acquire enough capital to renovate the plots. However, either due to their location between other actively occupied houses or personal interest, they do not want to sell the plot, practising a wait-and-see technique, passign the ownership of the land as an potential economic asset. The government has a right to reposses the land, however, this rarely occurs due to the complicated land ownership condition. The number of such neglected plots, contrasted with the growing interest of urbanites in rural areas as places of potential, suggests the pending appearance of new functionality and a role which the village could play in both the life of indigenous villagers as well as the ever closer physically and ideologically urbanites should be explored. The village is undergoing inevitable modernization in areas such as the way of living as well as the aesthetic of the village, and new small house policy

✓ Fig. 11 Plan of Shan Pui Tsuen old village showcasing the classification of inactive plots (Source: Author, 2023).



61 PLOTS / 1900m² / 23% of village built footprint



C COMPLETE STRUCTURE

23 PLOTS / 707m² / 9% of village built footprint

H HERITAGE (grade 3)

17 PLOTS / 530m² / 7% of village built footprint

E EMPTY / INCOMPLETE STRUCTURE

21 PLOTS / 663m² / 8% of village built footprint

houses have become a 'contemporary' rural housing style. The remaining houses in the traditional Lingnan style, however, characteristic of Hong Kong's early years landscape, are facing the fate of falling into oblivion. With limited funds committed towards their preservation as buildings of now always architectural significance, such as temples or ancestral halls with rich ornamentation, their fate seems pretty much determined. This is not to say that these structures hold the community together, however, they can be seen as a reminiscent and built register of the village in the past and can be seen as having the potential to serve the current population of the village, both the original and outsiders. This approach can help to see the past on equivalent terms with the progress and modernization of the village as well as building its capital, potentially rejecting the idea of turning away from the past as less attractive (at the moment old structures hold little interest in the average villager's life).

At the same time, considering the number of extended families produces a more expansive image of the village and puts it into a different, more detached from the physical concept of the village, to a more conceptual, almost economic unit, and the concept of the household economy (more in the sense of relying on income from abroad – a broad definition of the village boundary). It is interesting to observe that both the physical and conceptual boundaries of the village have evolved during the described intense period of change in NT.

The first obvious expansion of the village boundary is due to stretching peripheries, in many cases built to accommodate outsiders and gain rental profit. The idea of all the inactive residents returning to the village would undoubtedly change the household structure in the village. However, the exact ratio of the population that actively utilizes and lives in the village versus the community that still owns the land in the village but lives abroad is hard to trace, as such information is not required or regulated by the ding right policy. While many buildings are occupied, it remains unsurveyed how many of them are inhabited by the original clansmen rather than urban tenants. With six thousand people registered to be living in the TTVA and its vicinity, we can't be sure how many are active residents. Such a study has not yet been carried out, and the numbers can only be estimated based on the village representative's feeling, which estimates around 40% of residents to be from outside the social boundary of the village. This study has an obvious limitation in collecting such data; however, it could provide a stronger argument for the practical and measurable impact and extent of the neglected plots.

The second, less obvious, is understood through the connection between the village (land and its community) and the previously mentioned capital in the form of neglected plots. In that sense, the old village, which has previously connected its members through various on-site festivals and customs, has now incorporated the international society of people bound by rights to the land in each other's vicinity, painting a less romantic, however vital, economic function of the village. This time it is executed

through rights holding rather than natural and human capital, as in the case of agricultural practice. Such rights have produced many cases of abuse of the Small House Policy, especially by people who live abroad and have no intention of coming back to their natal village.

As Hayes explains, ownership and use of land have always been subjects of interest in the village, beyond the economics of subsistence. The issue concerns administration, land use, and political expectations posed on the government for the long-standing policy, which origin is no longer justifiable in the current context. The response to the issue is possibly even more complex and requires the engagement of many stakeholders, who are already a part of the conversations, as mentioned administration, planning, etc., and those who could change the course of the discussion, such as conservation bodies on both cultural, heritage and natural levels.

Paradoxically, the policy allowed many villagers to retain their clan ties and hence customs within the same village or hueng, effectively preventing the complete disassembly of communities. However, it has indeed changed the physical appearance of the village as well as the way of living and earning a living in the village. In line with the potential of loss theory, it has changed the notion of the village from traditional to contemporary rural society and created new values and meanings influencing the cohesiveness of the community.



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Pages 60-61. Sequence of four plans on Shan Pui Tsuen shows the changes in the typical architecture into a 'small house' style village-scape (Source: <https://www.hkmaps.hk/viewer.html>, 2023).

Pages 62-68. Empty or neglected plots in Shan Pui Tsuen (Source: Author, February/March 2023).

Volume 02.

Adaptation

Chapter 03 | Suggested response (design framework)

Future village function

The future of the village unit can be seen to expand its user from the indigenous villager to the city dweller, positioning the village both physically and conceptually between both realms. Hence, and considering the village entity from solely a functional level, which however allows for the spiritual and societal functions to persist, the futures of the village should perhaps respond to and benefit both of the groups. This opportunity for conscious/organized integration of mutual interest can be seen as an opportunity, however, for the thriving of the village community and not as an endangerment for its connection with the past.

Currently, the Village Expansion Area is determined by Village-type Development land use specifications. In Tung Tau, that means that the land currently used for fishpond cultivation could be turned into a built area. This has been slowly happening with temporary car shelters and storage-like structures reclaiming the land facing the village front. While SHP, initially designed as a temporary measure, continues (with several amendments over time), it has created several issues, such as unsustainable land distribution to the growing population of eligible, +18 male population, with land originally planned for the village expansion already exhausted. In effect, not only the boundaries of New towns but also the village boundaries are expanding and crossing with one another, partially facilitated through the lack of detailed planning as the villager is not required to submit formal building plans to the Government, enabling houses to be built quickly and with significant savings (Hopkins 2003). It has also been criticized as highly discriminatory in both female rights but also between rural and urban societies, which created space for silent mutual disapproval and questioned the government's favouritism. The policy has been under investigation since 1995 as corruption and abuse of rights were prominent at that time already.

However, the issues of SHP touch on extensive and complex issues of general land supply and distribution, political expectations and so on. In the scope of cultural conservation, it can be observed as a contribution to the previously mentioned social restructuring, loss of traditional vernacular housing, and neglect of land due to rights abuse (with no legal obligation to inform about actual living status – this means that any member of indigenous society who, for example, lives abroad can apply for the plot in the village and use it for profit generation or reserve for potential future uses). These issues, hence, can be addressed through village-scale intervention which takes into consideration the effect of the policy among other social and cultural changes in the area, while not relying on the policy and its future form as defining.

In line with the ideas presented in the first chapter concerning the reinterpretation of fringe villages as traditional societies in their own terms, taking as an argument the definition of tradition as an adaptation rather

than a frame from the past, this paper argues to look at the villages on the fringe with Yung Long, such as the ones in the Tung Tau alliance, through the above perspective. The enabling of the rural society to benefit fully from the modern way of living while abandoning the strategy for protecting its past practices at all costs but rather focusing on its adaptation can be seen as an active mode of preservation and sustaining the community. Searching for the potential possible losses in the amount, type, or frequency and scale of practised customs or beliefs needs to be compensated with the creation of new values and meaning in the community to avoid situations of abandonment or, like, in the case of the west village, potential complete integration of urban and rural mentality overpowering the latter one and replacing the rural society fully. To achieve that, independence of thought and pride of individuality of the rural community can be fostered through design interventions and uncovering of the new function which rural society and its land can play in Hong Kong, enabling the natural evolution of the village community. Hence, such enabling cannot be implied directly through third parties but should allow for the village community to become an idea initiator.

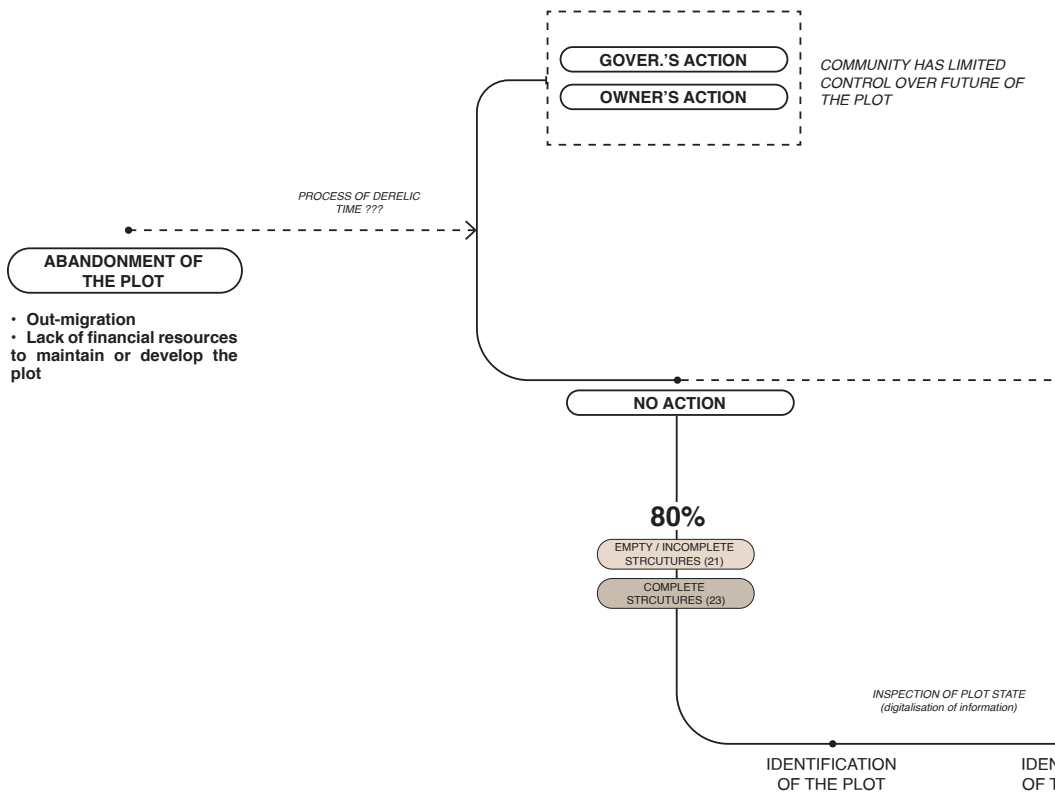
Proposal

The colonial practices tied to the land reveal the significance in constructing the concepts of tradition, custom, society, and land in rural Hong Kong. In his book "Restructuring Chinese Society," driven by archival materials, Allen Chun suggests that the land has become an interface between the colonial government, and currently the SAR government, and rural society, giving birth to its perception of the village and its society, through which this society was regulated and continues to be regulated until this day.

The tangible built space in the form of shrines, communal houses, etc., acts as a mediator in sustaining the relations in the community and hence allows for the practices to perpetuate. However, the practice itself is set upon the intangible set of values and hence inseparable from the physical, material representation - architecture. In that sense, the act of preservation of the community lies in both their ability to change and adapt beliefs and values, as much as for the space to be able to accommodate those changes. This, though reflecting on abrupt change imposed by external forces, together with the natural ability of the community to adapt to new reality, brings the concept of incrementalization and temporality as a design method.

In response, this paper proposes a scheme in which neglected plots are turned into commons and temporarily managed by the community for mutual benefit in terms of village development and profit for the original

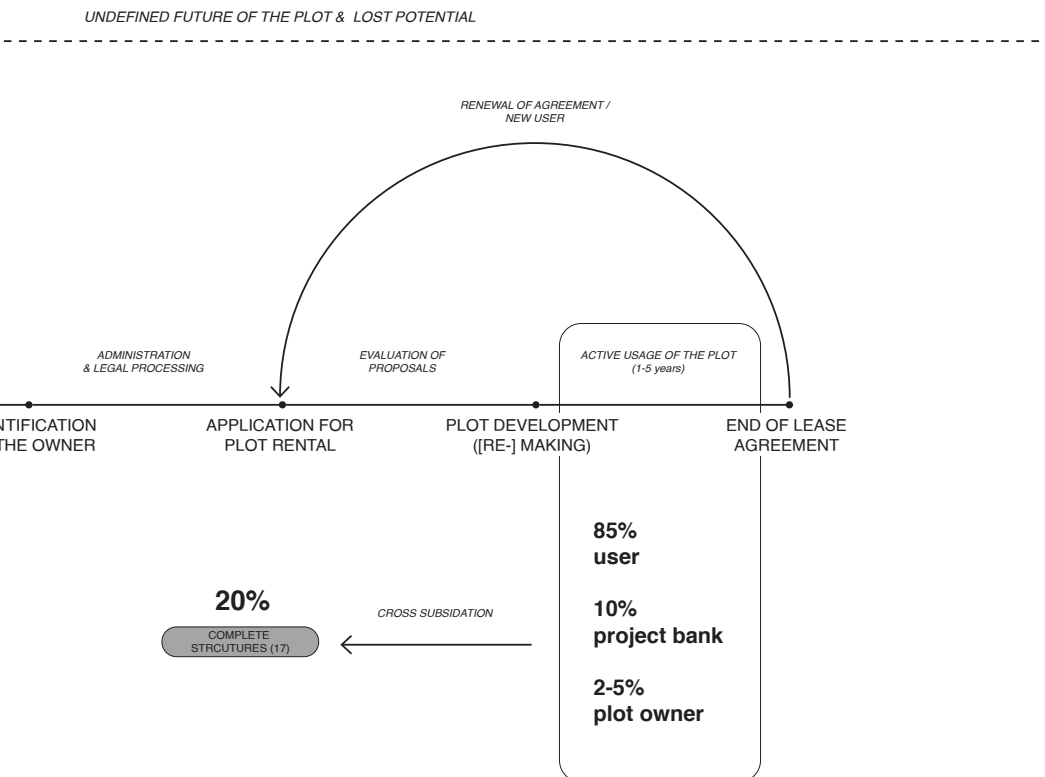
owner of the plot. In response, and as a method of cultural development and hence, its preservation this paper propose a management strategy to address the neglected plots, turning them into collectively managed commons. Firstly, the plot’s state of use and ownership is identified. Through the establishment of a local village managing office, a temporary redistribution of plot usage, is assigned to interested candidates – providing village residents with opportunities to open small local businesses within the village boundary with financial support from the organising body – e.g., Countryside Conservation Office. The plots are leased to users for a short period, and the profit generated from its activities is split between the plot user, legal plot owner and collective village. The fund is then distributed towards the revitalization of heritage-graded sites as places of collective cultural identity and with ownership transferred to collective village property



^ Fig. 12 Proposed plot management scheme for Shan Pui Tsuen neglected and inactive plots (Source: Author, 2023).

with community facilities. The application for the temporary redistribution of plot's use with the proposed program needs to ensure that the listed program does not include residential or squatter, temporary housing, but is limited to public use and small business proposals. The proposals are managed hence through the countryside conservation program rather than the government itself, with its previous approval of such scheme (the agreement, similar to regular planning permits in protected areas, includes the agreement on permitted uses and programs). (Fig. 12).

The plots have a common characteristic of neglected old structures, remnants of Lingnan-style architecture. They follow the traditional house footprint (called "yat fan dei" in Cantonese), which counts around 35 m², usually on a plot 3.5m by 6m, with an adjacent front opening and, in some



cases, a front yard. The structure, if present, has one and a half floors in the form of a cockloft not exceeding 6m in height in total. Due to the uniform size of the plot and the temporary nature of the intervention, it is possible to propose a structure based on a modular system, easy to assemble and disassemble, especially in the narrow village situation, which requires a short construction and de-construction period to avoid disturbance of neighbouring inhabited plots. Such solutions can be investigated and proposed, bearing in mind the locally available material, or can be adapted from already existing solutions in both Hong Kong and Mainland China (e.g., People's Architecture Office – Plug-In House).

Additionally, a legal framework for recognizing the time period under which the plot has been neglected needs to be developed. Such a framework considers scenarios under which the legal owner of the plot can be identified and unless presented with the outline of the plan of how the plot will be turned into use in the short term future, is obligated to join the scheme. Alternatively if a family member eligible for plot ownership can come forward with a proposal. In the situation where the plot owner can't be identified, the government resumption should include consideration for the collective ownership by the village, if the plot meets the requirements set by the proposed scheme.

Secondly, the plots can be rented from the original owner by the community as a whole for a proposed social activity program for an agreed period of time between 1 and 5 years, or by individuals collaborating in the scheme who live in the village or are associated with neighbouring villages. This prevents the overuse of such plots by residents wanting to cut costs. Working with individuals from either rural or urban origins who live in the village setting allows for better integration into the rural community and giving back to it. The short rental period allows for small plots to be utilized as start-up incubators and low-maintenance cost businesses, making the village a place of innovation and opportunity. Once the small business is able to generate bigger profits, it can make space for a new program. Additionally, the short rental period by the community collectively allows for the programs to adapt quickly to changing social dynamics and the evolving needs of the village.

The distribution of plots between business and community activities needs to be carefully balanced to allow for sufficient income from the project, which can be put into the development of community facilities. This large-scale system is based on cross-subsidization, where profits gathered from rent collected from small business owners can contribute to the development of community facilities.

Ostrom (1990) highlights that despite the rules based on observation of resource-based communities across the globe, the design of principles needs to be determined for the particular context. Many of Ostrom's observations are oriented towards natural resources such as fisheries. However, the neglected plots can be seen as land resources. It is also important to recognize the contribution in the management of neglected

plots, as pointed out in this paper or extensively covered by the Liver Research group in underutilized brownfields in the context of potential future land development.

As mentioned, the Small House Policy allows for the development of village houses in the vicinity of the village. However, the expanding need for such housing interferes with the often illegal expansion of boundaries and their overlap with other resources, such as historically documented exchange of fisheries for developable land or restriction of ecological buffer zones in favour of land development. In this case, management of existing resources in the form of plots and empty houses can slow down the process of extraction outside of village and town boundaries.

The scheme allows for scalability and is replicable in other villages present in the region. The scheme acts as a framework and can be adjusted to the unique situation of individual village situation. However, while the scheme can be applied individually per village, it encourages inter-village collaboration and exchange of building material resources, as well as utilizing the unique specialization of each village and its natural and cultural assets in resource and knowledge exchange of commons. However, there is no existential dependency on one another. In doing so, the project can allow for the development of stronger bonds between the villages and hence distinguish the rural society from the town, perhaps changing the general public idea of the hinterland as a land bank to a site of innovation and business opportunity, rendering it as a site worth of protection. At the same time, this approach hopes to generate a new perception of collective gain over individual profit.

The discussion about the ability of commons to self-organize extends beyond the traditional notion of common resources and can be seen as a potential in managing the neglected plots. The scheme aims to address the common land ownership challenges experienced in the rural context and their contribution to the mutual perception of town and country folks on one side, and the perception of rural land as a potential land bank on the other. By proposing the active use of currently underutilized plots for the benefit of both social groups, it hopes to render the image of the village as a place of peaceful co-creation between two groups.

Since many of the plots and structures bear architectural styles associated with the 'traditional society' and the past of Hong Kong, it aims to use that idea rooted in the general public's perception of tradition and align it with the innovation and future function of the village as a hub of innovation and a socio-cultural centre of Hong Kong. In doing so, it hopes to honour the role that such communities played in shaping the identities of the New Town masses in the 1970s upon the creation of the New Town program, and facilitate a conversation between two ideologies and identities co-existing in Hong Kong. This could involve exploring the ways in which these communities have contributed to the development of Hong Kong as a whole and highlighting their importance as part of the city's cultural heritage.

Additional considerations in proposing the scheme

What mechanisms can prevent the exploitation of newly created economic opportunities within the proposed scheme in an economy-driven society, taking into account the current abuses in pro-rural development policies (land ownership)? At what point can we accept the risks that might be brought by the proposal in favour of the gains it has to offer? And respectively, how can such risks be mitigated through either design or preventative policies?

It has to be noted that the complexity of the situation requires more engagement and research from various stakeholders, and this study limits itself to a particular dimension of the situation. Hence, the proposed solution cannot possibly respond to all posed challenges but is rather speculation on how particular design strategies could be used to address some of the by-products of the described condition in the context of cultural conservation and countryside development. To highlight the urgency of additional research and the involvement of different parties, it is important to highlight the potential shortcomings of the described proposal along with the described advantages:

What are the consequences of introducing additional business opportunities into the village system? Clear boundaries of who can benefit from and bear responsibility for the plots need to be established. This becomes particularly important considering the non-unified village community split between indigenous and outsiders. Based on case studies of proposals such as the Lai Chi Wo project, the introduction of profit opportunities through land management does pose a risk of awakening the ghosts of past family affairs and quarrels over the original ownership. In the case of Lai Chi Wo, the introduction of some Airbnb programs stirred arguments between neighbouring plot owners, with opposing and agreeing on parties regarding the introduction of newcomers into the village. In some cases, disputes between family members took place regarding the management of the plot and the direct and indirect distribution of profits among family members. Additionally, a more complex management strategy in profit distribution is required, as well as a definition of a clearly defined boundary of beneficiaries for the project.

In that case, a managerial body is established and takes on the role of conflict resolution and monitoring. Considering the purpose of this scheme, the Countryside Conservation Office can be appointed as an exemplary management body responsible for the legal and administrative side of the proposal. However, a few members of the village community can be elected or hired to oversee the process and management of material inflow in the construction of temporary houses.

The program allows for financial benefit to the original owner of the land without much interest in the plot itself. This could prolong the time of negligence of the plot as a form of passive income for the owner, which

could have an adverse effect on the intended result of the project. Hence, a time restriction on proposed structures should be implemented. At the end of that time, the owner can make an agreement between the business owner or the village community to buy the plot and turn it into a permanent structure, rather than selling it to an anonymous buyer. This period allows for the development of a mutual bond between those coming from the city into the village, as well as for business owners to test ideas (rural as an idea incubator), and for the community to see economic and social benefits. This approach aims to use the situation of empty houses for the benefit of the community and the protection of the heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of colonial practices and land dynamics in rural Hong Kong has revealed their significant impact on the development of notions such as tradition, society, and land. Consequently, the countryside has often been romanticized by both researchers and urban inhabitants, leading to the entrapment of tradition and heritage within the confines of the past. However, it is crucial to recognize that the concept of a “traditional society” is merely another manifestation of communities adapting to changing contexts. Attempts to preserve this state as the original and authentic reinforce the prevailing understanding of tradition as something rooted in the past rather than associated with progress. Over the past 125 years, colonial rule and the SARS epidemic have altered the image of the northwest New Territories (NT). This has prompted a shift in the research agenda, raising questions about whether to preserve communities where traditional characteristics still persist or acknowledge the absence of substantial elements worth preserving as in line with the mainstream definition of ‘tradition’. By viewing the modernization of rural society as an adaptation to the changing context rather than a complete break with the past, alternative perspectives can be explored regarding the seemingly opposing concepts of tradition and progress. This approach offers new avenues for addressing cultural persistence and rural cultural conservation within dynamic contexts and cultures.

Drawing from the discourses of Holtorf and DeSilvey, it becomes evident that preserving the cultural heritage of a community necessitates maintaining an open trajectory of development and allowing for diverse outcomes in terms of values and relationships among community members. Tangible architectural elements such as shrines and communal houses play a crucial role in sustaining these relationships and perpetuating cultural practices. However, it is essential to recognize that these practices are grounded in intangible values and inseparable from their physical and material representations, particularly architecture. Therefore, preserving a community involves not only its ability to adapt and transform beliefs and values but also the capacity of the physical space to accommodate these changes. In the face of abrupt external changes and the community’s inherent adaptability, the concepts of incrementalisation and temporality emerge as valuable design methods for the proposed scheme of neglected plot management.

The proposed scheme aims to revitalize underutilized resources by temporarily transforming neglected plots into communal spaces managed by the local community. This practical solution entails categorizing and identifying neglected plots, establishing a legal framework, and facilitating rental agreements. By enabling the implementation of short-term social activities, start-up incubators, and low-maintenance businesses within the village, the scheme utilizes cross-subsidization, where profits generated from the rental of small business spaces contribute to the development of community facilities. This approach ensures a balanced distribution of

resources and a sustained commitment to the project.

Furthermore, the scheme demonstrates the potential for scalability and replicability in other villages within the region. While allowing for individual application, it promotes inter-village collaboration, resource sharing, and the utilization of unique local expertise and cultural assets. By fostering such collaborative endeavours, the project strengthens inter-village bonds and challenges the prevailing perception of rural areas solely as land reserves. It positions rural villages as sites of innovation, business opportunities, and cultural significance, thereby reshaping the perception of the hinterland and promoting its preservation. Through this approach, the scheme seeks to generate a renewed understanding of the collective benefits that outweigh individual profits. It also addresses common challenges related to land ownership in rural contexts and their implications for the mutual perception of urban and rural populations. By actively utilizing currently underutilized plots for the benefit of both social groups, the scheme aims to transform the village into a space of peaceful co-creation and innovation, effectively merging the ideals of tradition and modernity. All together coming to be a strategy for the active preservation of rural cultural heritage, allowing for the change to achieve continuity.

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