Urbanizing Forest and Village Trees in Hong Kong’s Sha Tin Valley, 1976-1997

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Hong Kong is searching for ways to mediate between the pull of tradition and the push of development. This article provides a perspective to understand the historic relationships between Hong Kong’s need to accommodate explosive growth, traditional villages, the colonial government’s regulatory context for village redevelopment, and recent debates about village transformation in post-colonial Hong Kong. The focus is on the architectural and planning context for Sha Tin New Town, a major development project undertaken by the Hong Kong government in the late 1970s, and on the salient policy shifts related to village conservation and redevelopment in the Sha Tin Valley in the past twenty years. The article concludes with recommendations for future village conservation, development and renewal policies and it outlines a framework within which to make policy choices.

In a startling setting, the conventional image of metropolitan Hong Kong focuses on row after row of skyscrapers soaring on the edge of world's busiest port, while the precipitous mountains of Victoria Peak form a spectacular background. The uniqueness of Hong Kong’s political situation — as a “Special Administrative Region” (SAR) of China — is also reflected in its architecture — as an unparalleled Special Urban Region characterized by some of the world’s most modern and dense, high-rise human habitations. However, for all its intensity and relentless urbanism, Hong Kong is also awash with striking rural settings, especially in the New Territories, the area between the hills of Kowloon and the Chinese border that were ceded to Britain in 1898 under a 99-year lease. The New Territories contain a multitude of centuries-old, low density, two- and three-story village settlements, many of which reflect traditional cultural preferences and time-honored patterns of living. High-density, rural-urban hybrid settings, sometimes called deshakota, or extended metropolises, by scholars focusing on these kinds of urbanizing trends in Asia, also play key roles in the
dynamics associated with Hong Kong’s settlements, especially in the New Territories. If these urbanized habitations in a rural setting are thought of as urbanizing forests, then older, traditional enclaves spread throughout portions of the New Territories might well be thought of as village trees. In light of these contrasting physical aspects of Hong Kong’s built environment, and in the context of Hong Kong’s burgeoning economic development over the past two decades, a key question is how, where, and for whom are New Territories’ villages being accommodated in the course of development? How, then, can we best understand the forest and the trees?

The answer, which frames the focus of this article, lies in understanding not only the unique legal and political status of the villages, but also villagers’ deep respect for the history of their native place and the religious or social traditions associated with the village and its environs. Ever since the growth of Hong Kong as a colonial territory in the mid-nineteenth century, a respect for traditional values among many of Hong Kong’s villagers has been manifest not only in architectural form, but also in religious festivals, clothing, food preparation and communal feasts, or other, ritualized community events. Sometimes those traditional values are associated with family groups, such as when members of the Tang clan share in making decisions about how to maintain their ancestral halls; while at other times values are reflected more broadly through ethnic affiliations, such as when villagers demonstrate their loyalties to the memories and power of Hakka clans that migrated south to the Hong Kong region during the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD). At other times they are even broader in scope, as when villagers from different clans or ethnic groups demonstrate shared values by virtue of being Chinese. This latter trend has been especially evident in the run-up to, and aftermath of, Hong Kong’s handover to China on July 1, 1997.

Explosive regional development has profoundly and inexorably transformed the villages, altering the physical setting and lives of the villagers. Because of the increasing need for buildable land (97 percent of Hong Kong’s land is unbuildable due to slope and ledge outcropping), accommodation and respect for tradition in Hong Kong is best understood in terms of relentless waves of transition. The struggle has as much to do with problems associated with place-based preservation as with the insistence on some villagers’ need to respect traditional ways of life. The terrain for defining tradition is not uniform. Some villages have been demolished, some moved, others protected, and still others either re-erected or resurrected in the wake of private and public development. Now that Hong Kong’s sovereignty has reverted to China, the factor of how the new SAR government will handle issues of land tenure has been added to the complicated equation of how villages in the New Territories are being transformed. For the past century, since the New Territories came to be controlled by the British colonial regime, traditional land rights were interpreted in the context of Western legal assumptions that underlaid much of Hong Kong’s territorial development. Now that the People’s Republic of China has regained control, the question remains how China’s assumptions about what constitute traditional land rights will infuse new urbanization, some of which will occur in the next decade either because of projected population growth in the SAR of Hong Kong (from 6.3 million in 1997 to 8.2 million in 2010), or because of projected new towns that will emerge in response to the Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation’s (KCRC) proposed new rail lines in the western New Territories.

During the past quarter century land suitable for building in Hong Kong has been at such a high premium that competing interests have vied for the best locations. These have included private development companies, public housing departments, rural district committees, groups of village elders, as well as individuals holding title to choice land. Villagers in Hong Kong, unlike other residents, hold title to their land by virtue of the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing. At times the thirst for habitable land has created tensions among these groups, as some seek profit by building without regard for village welfare, while others search for compromises between Hong Kong’s overall housing needs and the more particular requirements of individual settlements. In two generations rural land in Sha Tin has marched through a seemingly relentless transition from rice paddy to specialty crops, and from illegal industrial development to government-sponsored high-rise housing. When viewed from the perspective of a government faced with overwhelming population pressures, the key challenge has been finding ways to accommodate the villagers’ perspectives, while at the same time proceeding expeditiously to improve living conditions for Hong Kong residents. As Hong Kong reverts to China, this challenge will not abate, and in the process most of Hong Kong’s villages face a future in which change seems inevitable. By investigating the creation of Sha Tin New Town, an area where village transformation has been occurring for the past generation, a rich historical context is provided to understand both current realities and future possibilities associated with Hong Kong’s urbanizing villages. These insights may be useful in understanding other situations where traditional settlements face challenges associated with rapid development and urbanization.

**THE SETTING**

The Sha Tin Valley is in the New Territories of Hong Kong north of the Kowloon Hills. Oriented southwest of the mouth of the Tolo Harbor, the Shingmun River traverses the valley. Sha Tin is separated from Hong Kong’s centralized urban areas, Kowloon and Hong Kong Island, by high, rugged mountains, but it is intimately linked by major rail and road networks (FIG.1).

There are three main reasons why Sha Tin provides a useful case study to analyze issues associated with the transformation of traditional villages in the context of development.

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First, the valley contains a large number of villages predating the founding of Hong Kong. Second, government housing policies targeted the valley for a massive development scheme in the early 1960s. Third, these housing policies have been driven by demographic and economic forces that have shaped Hong Kong’s dramatic transformation from a trade center and shipping port to a manufacturing hub, and more recently to its role as one of East Asia’s most significant and booming financial centers.

In 1960, when the Hong Kong government issued its first Master Plan to develop a new town in the Sha Tin Valley, the rural landscape was inhabited by 30,000 people in 42 villages (FIG.2). Having learned from the construction of a nearby reservoir about how expensive and time-consuming relocating villages could be, the government’s original policy was to preserve all but a few of the villages, maintaining them in their original setting. The original objective of this policy was to “maintain and respect [these villagers’] lifestyle, culture and heritage.” In 1960 the government was essentially engaging in what one preservationist has termed a policy of “creative anachronism,” whereby villages might be retained as reminders of past folkways until other uses might be found for them. In the early 1960s the government was placing these villages in a holding pattern, not sure of which resources to target, or what precisely it meant by “preservation.” To place the government’s actions in a proper context, in the early 1960s most European and North American governments were just beginning to scrutinize how they might establish historic districts, most of which were in urban core regions. East Asian governments found themselves in uncharted territory when considering the preservation of historic villages and districts. The fact that village elders and their sons had long-standing legal rights to their land by virtue of tradition and treaties added to the challenge of “preservation,” however one might have defined it.

Sha Tin was one of three “new towns” (along with Tsuen Wan New Town and Tuen Mun New Town) planned in 1960 by the Hong Kong government in the New Territories in response to successive waves of immigration since the 1949 Revolution in China. Increasing numbers of immigrants from China had created squatter settlements throughout the territory. A disastrous fire in the Shek Kip Mei squatter settlement on Christmas Eve, 1953, had left 50,000 squatters homeless, which helped galvanize official interest in policies that might provide a solution to the housing shortfall. The 1960 policy, revised in 1972, sought to rehouse squatters and relieve overcrowding in densely inhabited urban areas by housing 1.6 million people by the mid-1980s.

Since the mid-1970s the Sha Tin Valley has undergone progressively more intense urbanization, in part because of Hong Kong’s dedication to providing residents with better housing, and in part because of the concomitant, spectacular success of private investment, local entrepreneurship, and commercial development. Today, Sha Tin New Town is a city of more than 434,000 persons, while Ma On Shan, planned and built as an extension of Sha Tin New Town at the northern end of the valley, has more than 120,000 residents. Approximately thirty villages dot the landscape within, between, and at the edges of these new urban areas (FIG.3,4).

Among the Old Villages: The “New Town” of Sha Tin (1960-1976)

The logic of the built form and settlement pattern in the Sha Tin Valley reflects the predominant nature of traditional rural development in southern China in the late 1800s. The New Territories were created in 1898, when Great Britain acquired a 99-year lease on 335 square miles of land from China. The lease for these New Territories resulted from the Convention of Peking, signed in 1898. Those living in and around the villages in the approximately 650 scattered Hakka or Punti (non-Hakka) settlements engaged in traditional farming practices such as growing rice, vegetables and flowers, or...
raising livestock. Architecturally, the villages contained both a variety of form and a shared origin from China’s rich vernacular heritage. Historians have noted three types of nucleated village plans, the spatial pattern and form of which were influenced by geomantic practices (or fengshui). The walled village, or wai, was characterized by row houses arranged in a square or rectangular block, where the parallel rows of houses were separated by narrow lanes, and there was a wide communal rice-drying ground (hetang, or wo tong) in front of the wai.

One of the best examples of this configuration, Tsang Tai Uk, is found in the Sha Tin Valley (FIG. 5). Originally designed and built by quarry owner Tsang Koon-Man in 1848, Tsang Tai Uk is a self-contained, 450-by-150-foot, walled village with several rows of dwellings around a central ancestral hall. The imposing series of structures houses a single Hakka clan. The founder situated his rural fortress so that he could access his business ventures in the city reasonably, but he also purchased ample land around the village — the best land available in the valley — to afford himself a stable income during inevitable business recessions. Reflecting the troubled times of late imperial China, the village was built with high walls and a defensible gate to protect families from scoundrels and late-night robbers.

Today traditions persist in Tsang Tai Uk, as the villagers have resisted change, fending off opportunities for commercial development, while at times allowing the occasional visitor or curiosity seeker to pass through the foreboding gates (FIG. 6).

The other two village types are unwalled cun (or tsuen) — either regular, in that all houses share a single direction and fengshui; or irregular, consisting of unparalleled rows of houses, often arranged along the slope of a hill. Almost all village houses were one-story structures “built on brick foundations of burnt blue brick with roofs of tile laid on pine rafters.” In part to minimize expense, the houses were often constructed with party walls, light wells commonly located directly behind the house entries. Besides houses, common village structures and significant places included ancestral halls, ancillary buildings to the halls, shrines to the Earth God, earth graves and hillside sites for burial urns, and woodlands protected from being cut because of fengshui (FIG. 7).

For almost fifty years the government did not seek to disrupt overtly the traditional life of New Territories’ residents. However, the government did divide the New Territories into
administrative districts, and it appointed district officers to oversee land transactions and act as magistrates. Additionally, from 1899 to 1903 the British government surveyed, registered and recorded all privately owned land, creating 354,000 private “Old Schedule Lots,” which comprised the Block Crown Lease. A special Land Court was established in March 1900 to resolve disputes over ownership, legal status, and land title. As a result of this process and stipulations in the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), New Territories’ inhabitants retained possession of land located within or adjacent to the villages. Land remaining outside the villages was deemed “unallocated crown land” and was leased by public auction. British policy, as voiced by Governor Sir Henry Blake, was to safeguard pre-existing landed interests and not to interfere in contemporary “usages and good customs.” In keeping with this declaration, British administrators tried to ensure that all policies and programs would be appropriately and clearly communicated to local residents. To facilitate dialogue with the District Offices, the government created a network of 27 Rural Committees. Each village had a representative on one of the Committees, which also had powers to arbitrate clan or family disputes and dispense general advice.

Along with other community leaders, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the rural committees formed the Heung Yee Kuk in 1926. Originally intended as an appointed assembly of elders to advise the government, by the mid-1950s the Kuk had matured into an elective body that made its own choices and decisions. The Kuk lobbied the territorial administration in land and development disputes, applied pressure on Hong Kong’s governor, and took issues directly to London when local remedies were not resolved to the organization’s satisfaction. The institutional and political evolution of the Kuk developed in tandem with broader social changes in the New Territories after World War II, when immigrants from China began to flood into Hong Kong and the New Territories experienced heightened pressures of development. In the early 1950s the government subdivided the two district offices into five and began to allocate land for housing and industrial use.

As the housing, public-works, and industrial-development projects began to expand into increasingly rural areas, some villages were surrounded by higher intensity development or were relocated to other sites. In response, some elders in the Heung Yee Kuk began to question whether the British government had the right to interfere with the villages. In 1957 a local crisis erupted when some elders resigned from the Heung Yee Kuk to be able to speak more authoritatively on behalf of their
villages, resulting in government reorganization of the Heung Yee Kuk and permission for Kuk representatives to sit on key government sub-committees dealing with land tenure.

Over the first half-century of British rule in the New Territories, these fragile local institutions provided the foundation for a dramatic economic, demographic, social and physical transition, which occurred as a result of the population boom after World War II and the tremendous economic growth in Hong Kong from 1960 to 1980. Between 1921 and 1927 Hong Kong's population grew 37 percent from 457,000 to 625,000 persons. From 1921 to 1931 the population again grew by 34 percent, increasing from 625,000 to 840,000 persons. World War II and the occupation by the Japanese reduced the population to 600,000 by 1945, but with the end of the war, by 1947, the population tripled to 1.8 million. The revolution in China caused Hong Kong to absorb more than 100,000 people per month from 1947 to 1948. By 1950 the population of Hong Kong was 2.1 million, and by 1961 the population was just under 3.2 million, a 400 percent increase since 1931.

Hong Kong's burgeoning population provided the backbone to restructure the economy from its shipping, warehouse and distribution industries to manufacturing in the early 1950s. Supported by many low-paying jobs and an eager work force, the manufacturing-based economy grew at an astounding rate, and the population grew by another 47 percent between 1961 and 1974. In 1974, when the government began constructing Sha Tin New Town, the population of Hong Kong stood at 4.7 million.

THE NEW TOWNS PROGRAM: THE DIALOGUE MATURES IN 1960

The Sha Tin Valley's traditional villagers began to feel the ripples of these demographic and economic changes by 1960, when the Hong Kong government embarked on its New Towns program. The fire that left 53,000 squatters homeless in 1953 led the government to establish a special committee in 1955 to study the housing situation and recommend major changes in Hong Kong's land development policies. In 1957 the government identified six sites for reclamation and new town development: Tai Po, Kwai Chung, Junk Bay, Sha Tin, Tuen Mun, and Tsuen Wan.

For the villages, the new town initiative resulted in two critical policy shifts. The first was a move toward comprehensive village planning. In 1958 the government had imposed density limits and open-space planning standards, in effect creating a basic framework for land-use planning throughout Hong Kong. The second shift concerned the government's policy to acquire land for development as well as respond to pressure from local landowners for permission to convert land from agriculture to industrial or higher-density residential uses. Because of the large number of villages and amount of land under cultivation, implementing these policies was difficult.

There was so much privately held land (Old Schedule Lots) in the Sha Tin Valley that the government was experiencing a shortage of "Unallocated Crown Land," which could be readily used to develop the new town. Another problem was that village land owners (elders or their sons) wanted to sell or lease some of their property to developers. In 1960 the government devised a way to address these two problems simultaneously through a program of transferable development rights. For every five square feet of agricultural land surrendered, two square feet of building land was allocated (in the form of a certificate), and the government paid the village a premium based on the difference in value.

This policy had two critical outcomes for the traditional villages: land sales and *ad hoc* development. The ratio became the basis for a generation of land-use development schemes by Sha Tin's public and private developers. Villagers were able to sell the new development rights on the open market, much of which was bought by developers. This policy, known as the "Letter B" system, provided the village with a marketable certificate tied to specific development parcels in the new towns. Each new town development office designated several parcels of urban development land for redeemed "Letter B" certificates. Developers bid to develop "Letter B" parcels by purchasing the required number of certificates on the open market. However, under the conditions of the 1984 Basic Law Agreement between Great Britain and China, after July 1, 1997 "Letter B" certificates are no longer operative.

The second outcome was that *ad hoc* development was effectively sanctioned in many portions of the New Territories, because the same 1960 circular also instituted a new development control on both agricultural buildings and "village-type houses." In the early 1960s the Secretary of the New Territories set the criteria for "village-type houses" by defining them as having up to 700 square feet and being 15-25 feet high. To implement this policy, "building licenses for villagers who wished to build village-type houses on their own land for their own use were made free of premium, and were freely given provided the lot is of suitable size and the building will not interfere with any rural development or town planning requirements." The height limit of 25 feet was equivalent to three stories, "hence [the] shoddy concrete boxes cheek-by-jowl with old stone houses, and clutches of Spanish style townhouses in the midst of the former paddy." (Fig.8)

Adding to the problems created by changes in government policies was an increasingly acute problem associated with squatter settlements. Development activity in all of the new town sites attracted squatters, and the problem of uncontrolled construction in and near New Territories villages was exacerbated by the proliferation of squatter settlements. The government surveyed the problem in 1958 and began issuing temporary construction permits for squatters but limiting structures to three per acre. Enforcement proved difficult, and in 1976 the problem had grown; even as late as 1981 squatters were still successfully erecting structures illegally on village land.
TRANSFORMATION AND REGULATION OF TRADITION IN THE SHA TIN VALLEY

Economic and social trends as well as governmental changes of policy from the early 1950s to the early 1960s presaged substantial changes for Sha Tin's 42 villages.31 In 1961 Sha Tin was originally planned for a population of about 360,000 people as a suburb of Kowloon and Hong Kong and was not thought of as a self-sufficient community.32 Then, in 1967 the government superseded its earlier plan for Sha Tin and called for “higher density residential and industrial development” to create a self-sufficient and balanced new town for about one million residents, recognizing the valley’s importance in the overall development of Hong Kong.33 In 1973 the New Territories Development Department (NTDD) was established, with a multidisciplinary management team appointed to oversee planning strategies.34 In 1976 the master plan was again revised, and it provided for a population of about 475,000 people, covering a 1,740-hectare development area, of which 1,500 hectares were designated for urban development.35 Four areas in the valley were earmarked for industrial development; by the mid-1970s this development forced the removal of five villages near Fo Tan.36 The Master Landscape Plan for Sha Tin completed in 1977 noted that “for all practical purposes the land in Sha Tin is held in private ownership and consists of the villages themselves and the surrounding agriculture land.” Recognizing that most, if not all, of the agricultural land would need to be resumed by the government, the Master Landscape Plan advocated that landscape and tree planting values be the criteria to guide village conservation as Sha Tin New Town was being built.37

With respect to accommodating Sha Tin’s traditional villages in the context of valley development, by the mid-1970s the New Territories Development Department was pursuing three strategies: (1) to “remove” villages, as was done near Fo Tan; (2) to compensate villagers with “Letter B” land-exchange agreements, which were then freely traded and sold; and (3) to “preserve” villages by drawing boundaries around them, widening roads near them, and connecting them to water and sewer lines.38 Related to this last strategy, two examples that illustrate the divergent approaches to preservation are Tsang Tai Uk and Tai Wai. During the initial plans for Sha Tin Valley in the 1960s there was a proposal to preserve as a tourist site Tsang Tai Uk, one of the most historically significant traditional villages, and to locate a parking area for tourist buses adjacent to the site. Because of resistance by the villagers, this plan was scuttled, and the village has remained unrestored and in need of maintenance (FIG. 9). Tai Wai, adjacent to a station of the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) rail line, was destined to be more integrated into the valley’s overall development. Here the approach was to define a boundary around the village and permit new construction that effectively encircled the traditional village. A similar approach characterized the development of Tin Sam, a smaller village south of Tai Wai (FIGS. 10, 11).

The forces behind the government’s policy to regulate tradition in the Sha Tin Valley were as follows: (a) it had determined that such “tradition” in the form of villages was important; and (b) furthermore, the villagers had long-standing rights to their land, so legally the government had to cope with their traditions even if it had not wanted to.40

The rapid development in Sha Tin during and after the mid-1970s had substantial implications for the villages. Some were demolished for land reclamation, road creation, river channeling and other construction, while others experienced dramatic physical change due to residents’ either moving away, leasing their property to others, or demolishing older structures to build new dwellings. These physical changes came with “upheaval, disturbance and regret” (FIGS. 12, 13). As the new town emerged, many villagers reaped the benefits of the economic activity. By teaming with a development company, a villager could construct a three-story village-style house for approximately $200,000, and typically the villager could sell the property for five times that amount. “No wonder the villagers are turning to property speculation,” one journalist noted.41

As the Sha Tin Valley was transformed in the late 1970s by both the new town construction and speculative development in
some villages, the Heung Yee Kuk began questioning the government’s development strategies. In 1972 the Kuk had threatened to organize a protest to demand changes in land policy and village building regulations. After three weeks of negotiating, agreement was reached between Kuk and government representatives to allow more permissive development in the villages.44 Then, eight years later, in 1980, the Kuk voiced its concern again, asserting that a proposed, theoretically unifying “Hong Kong Lands Department” would infringe on the traditional rights of New Territories villagers.45 Despite these objections, a Lands Department was established, and one of its first initiatives was to control more effectively the construction of small houses in the villages.

By the mid-1980s, especially after the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, some rural residents throughout the New Territories intensified their protests against the control of their traditional land rights by the British colonial government. When the government tried to amend the Town Planning Ordinance to cover rural as well as urban land use, for example, the Heung Yee Kuk objected by asserting that landlords would be deprived of the right to change the use of their property.46

**REGULATING TRADITION FOR WHOM?**

In 1981 there were 7,000 applicants waiting for approval to construct new residences on privately owned land in villages in the New Territories. Rather than allow villagers to erect buildings under ordinance limits on any property they owned, the Department granted approval only to those projects having

“positive effects on village improvement projects.” The notion of “village improvement” was, after all, at the heart of the Heung Yee Kuk’s mission. Working for that improvement, in 1982 the Kuk responded to villagers’ complaints about water supply, transportation, and the sluggish permit process for new construction by urging the government to simplify application procedures, extend the 25-foot height limit for small houses,
and in some cases permit the erection of high-rise buildings within the boundaries of some villages.47

A year later, at Hin Tin Village, the Housing Department demolished 600 structures and relocated 167 families; and in 1983, 62 disgruntled factory operators at Sha Tin Wai also protested plans to relocate, arguing they had already been moved because of Sha Tin development.48 Removal of local factories became an especially sensitive issue in 1983, as the possibility of opening factories on the other side of the Chinese border became an increasingly attractive option for local industrial developers. In fact, Hong Kong suffered a major loss of manufacturing to Guangdong province in southern China.49

The resulting restructuring of Hong Kong's economy away from manufacturing to finance and business support and related services forced a concomitant shift in the strategy for development of Sha Tin. The attempts to balance jobs with population were replaced with improving the regional transit system and transportation links to Hong Kong, Kowloon, and the surrounding urban areas. Today more than 60 percent of Sha Tin residents commute elsewhere to work.50 Although Fo Tan attracted some factory investors, the other three areas zoned for industrial activity did not fare as well and are still largely vacant.

In spite of the recession in the early 1980s and the shift away from manufacturing, the government persisted in removing small manufacturing operations located near villages. Reacting to government efforts to extricate them from traditionally occupied sites, local factory owners in the Sha Tin Valley also began to protest. In 1981, for example, 4,000 owners and workers of small factories, pigsties, and poultry sheds in Pakshek Village balked at compensation offers to relocate.51

By the early 1980s the residential development of Sha Tin was increasingly outpacing industrial activity. For example, nearly three-quarters of all the land in Sha Tin developed by investors between the onset of the New Town program and 1983 was residential development.52 By 1984 an unexpected transformation was occurring, with greater emphasis placed on Sha Tin as a residential and commercial community and a decline in the available jobs for local residents. Traditional villages were rapidly being redeveloped as enclaves of low-density housing for the wealthy, and in 1983 a new "land premium system" helped spur on this redevelopment.

Money paid as a "premium" to the government by those building new houses reflected more fairly the current market value of the property, thus providing an incentive to invest in village-based construction.53 In the mid-1980s some developers approached the Sha Tin and North East District Planning Office (the former NTDD) with comprehensive village redevelopment proposals. In consideration of these proposals, the government allowed as many as nine village homes to be redeveloped at a time provided that adequate water and sewerage were supplied as well as access for fire trucks and firefighting equipment.54

In the 1980s, because of this intense market pressure, wholesale preservation of the villages was not working. Responding to a perceived need to minimize the differences between the cleaner exteriors of more recently constructed high-rise residences and the more weathered appearance of traditional village houses, the government selected piecemeal sites where the complexion of village buildings and open spaces could be improved.55 In 1987 the government began to invest in the "facelift" of Sha Tin villages more intensively, using revenue to cover most costs from a land premium collected from villagers. After the first "facelift" scheme was implemented at Tin Sam
Village near Tai Wai, it was then employed at eight other villages (FIG.14). Meanwhile, Hong Kong’s Antiquities and Monuments Office was frustrated by attempts to involve clan participation in governmental preservation initiatives. The clan did not entirely trust the motives of the Antiquities and Monuments Office. The Antiquities and Monuments staff were interested in preserving valued historic structures, while the villagers did not want to lose valuable development rights. Tensions once again mounted over transition and preservation in Sha Tin.

Those tensions were manifest in the months just prior to the handover, and they have persisted after July 1997. According to the 1972 Small House Policy, males over the age of eighteen who traced their ancestry to New Territories villages each held the right to erect a three-story villa within 91 meters of their village’s boundaries. However, the Hong Kong Lands Department has not been able to process construction applications quickly enough, to the extent that in spring 1997 there was a backlog of approximately 13,000 applications whose processing was estimated to take a decade to complete.

A 1993 task force charged with “restoring the New Territories’ rural charm” offered a quid pro quo to those who cleared the land of wrecked automobiles and surplus shipping containers by allowing them to jump the queue. Some Heung Yee Kuk members, however, condemned the proposal by saying that it was indicative of laziness on the part of government officers: “A civil servant is paid to do the job properly but offers to help people jump the queue. Isn’t it ridiculous?” The issue of whether to continue this policy, and how to ameliorate it, is one of several unresolved conservation-related questions still to be resolved after the handover of sovereignty. Reportedly, a task force will be created in fall 1997 to review the legitimacy of the Small House Policy.

CONCLUSIONS

Development in the 1990s has focused attention on a crucial dilemma for Sha Tin: how to preserve key places associated with the valley’s village traditions while the valley continues to develop (FIG.15).

As the Hong Kong government seeks to control land use more stringently, it continues to meet opposition from groups such as the Heung Yee Kuk, which remain skeptical not only about the motives behind those controls but also about the implications resulting from them. “Tradition” remains a thorny concept among New Territories villagers, Hong Kong’s political leaders, regulators, and design or preservation professionals. No one seems comfortable defining it, let alone regulating it. The most powerful forces shaping the villages’ physical form have been population growth, the economy, and the government’s housing-development policies. Those forces are now buffeting the villages, which have evolved within the confines of past and present governments’ changing rules.

Respecting land rights has not meant conserving historic places, culture, or traditional ways of life. The government’s original policy of village preservation was centered on avoiding the costs and difficulties of compensating villagers or the time and expense of moving a village to a new location. In the case of Tsang Tai Uk attempts by the government at architectural preservation were actually rooted in an attempt to promote tourism. The project failed because the villagers were not interested in becoming a tourist attraction when they found out about the intentions of the Development Office. Elsewhere in east Asia there have been similarly adverse reactions to the commodification of historic resources.

The villagers have seen tremendous opportunity to profit from the economic activity generated by the construction of Sha Tin New Town. The government’s attempts at regulating the village development and redevelopment resulted in shifting and revising policies in response to changing conditions and unanticipated outcomes. For many villages the result has been to gentrify by turning the village into an enclave of low-density housing for high-income residents. However, residents are beginning to balk. One resident said, “It is not worth giving up a harmonious village environment just for a private residential
Traditions persist in some villages where carefully planned redevelopment has been combined with comprehensively planned revitalization and expansion of the village, as in Tin Sam or Tai Wai.

The complicated issue of which "traditions" persist, and which are transformed, has recently centered around the question of whether women should enjoy land inheritance rights that traditionally were reserved for men. In 1994, ten years after the creation of the Basic Law, the government passed an "Exemption Ordinance" permitting women as well as men to inherit rural land. While some viewed this change as a way to equalize rights, others saw it as a "trampling of ethnic rights" as enshrined in Article 40 of the Basic Law, which states that "legitimate and traditional rights of the indigenous people in the New Territories" should be protected.

As a result of the exemption, between 1994 and 1996 sometimes violent demonstrations were staged in the New Territories by opponents of the ordinance. In fall 1996 the Heung Yee Kuk made this breech of the Basic Law an election issue among contenders for the post of Hong Kong's first Chief Executive. Tung Chee-hwa, who secured that post, announced he would advocate repealing the Exemption Ordinance. However, the issue remained alive as members debated whether to stage drastic demonstrations or directly petition China's National People's Congress prior to Hong Kong's handover ceremonies in July 1997. This land inheritance issue is still unresolved; however, it will probably be one of the questions to be decided in the near future by Hong Kong's new legislature.

A balanced policy of preservation and redevelopment in the Sha Tin Valley implies a flexible government policy that encourages the active involvement of the villagers, the Heung Yee Kuk, and government planners in several agencies. How that involvement might be encouraged, though, is open for debate. For example, in 1996 when the government invited public comment about a Town Planning White Bill, it unleashed a torrent of pent-up frustration from a number of groups that had felt disenfranchised from decision-making power. Several professional bodies then proposed that the government establish an overarching Planning Authority (similar to the currently constituted Hospital Authority) that "would sit on top of the myriad government departments which currently have a say in development strategy and policy implementation." No such independent authority has been created, although many continue to call for its establishment.

A sensible policy might be one that respects both traditional values as well as the land rights of the villagers, a policy that allows for not only transformation in response to market forces but also renewal and conservation of tradition within the context of change. Such a policy may be comprised of three elements. First, the policy should recognize economic and market forces. This element of the policy would permit villages to transform under redevelopment schemes that may bring higher densities and mixed uses. Village redevelopment guidelines and regulations might be liberalized in places where overall village transformation makes economic and spatial sense. Approval for schemes such as these might be based on consensus of the villagers, and be articulated in a village-wide comprehensive plan. The village plan would then show the physical transformation and provide evidence about how, precisely, the village would relate spatially to the growing urban context.

Second, the policy might articulate the values imbedded in preserving historic buildings and places in Sha Tin. Funds would then be provided to document both the physical place as well as the oral history and traditional customs. A local heritage museum is already on the drawing boards, although how the government plans to involve Sha Tin's varied constituencies is not yet clear. Professionals and researchers from local universities may be instrumental in building trust between the villagers and the Antiquities and Monuments Office (or other government agencies) so that Hong Kong preservationists could work more effectively with villagers. This has been attempted in other Asian cities such as Hanoi and Phnom Penh, although the results are not always universally encouraging. The key to reinforcing traditional culture and the power of place may lie in recognizing the power of the marketplace in Hong Kong's dynamic economy. The government's experience with transferring development rights and market-driven land-resumption strategies are fruitful models upon which to build this element of the policy.

The third policy element should address conservation and renewal of traditional places. Like Tin Sam, this form of village-based redevelopment and renewal might be carried out in places where village leaders and residents desire better living conditions in a traditional setting. As Sha Tin continues to change and grow, opportunities for village revitalization will increase. Planning for the necessary physical improvements should be put into place which addresses the needs of the residents. To accomplish this goal, key government land and public-works agencies should work collaboratively with the village clan and representative leaders to create a local redevelopment partnership. Such a partnership could become a powerful force to galvanize support for improving housing and living conditions in the context of well-articulated cultural values.

*FIGURE 15. Kak Tin Village on south side of Shingman River, surrounded by high-rise development. (Photo by Jeffrey Cody.)*
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2. P. Hase and E. Sin, Beyond the Metropolis: Villages in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, Hong Kong Limited, 1995).


4. For a broad overview of these traditions, see Urban Council of Hong Kong, Of Hearts and Hands: Hong Kong’s Traditional Trades and Crafts (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1996).

5. In 1993 the Tang clan, one of five significant clans in Hong Kong’s New Territories, agreed to establish the “Ping Shan Heritage Trail” in cooperation with Hong Kong’s Antiquities and Monuments Office, the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club, and the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust. However, in 1995, because of conflicts between the clan and the government concerning the construction of a road near Ping Shan that threatened ancestral burial sites, the clan withdrew its support for the trail, which was then closed. See W. Finlay, “A walk through Tang clan history,” South China Morning Post, December 7, 1993.


15. P. Hase and E. Sin, Beyond the Metropolis: Villages in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, Hong Kong Limited, 1999), pp.60-64.


17. Knapp, China’s Vernacular Architecture, p.84.


24. Ibid., p.65.

25. Ibid., p.71.

26. Ibid., p.89.

27. Richardson, “Accommodating Existing Settlements,” p.95. The “Letter B” system was in effect until March 1983, after which no further certificates were created, as documented in the South China Morning Post, March 16, 1983.

28. Bristow, Land-use Planning in Hong Kong, pp.87-88.
30. Bristow, Land-use Planning in Hong Kong, pp.86-87.
32. See, e.g., South China Morning Post, June 17, 1981, and September 13, 1981.
38. The four industrial areas were Fo Tan, Taishewu, Pak Shek, and Taishuihang. See Hong Kong Standard, October 21, 1980. For removal of the villages, see South China Morning Post, February 4, 1980.
41. The Hong Kong government also had seen in the case of Ha Ho Pa Village in Tsuen Wan that "fearful conditions" could result from simply ignoring the villagers' physical aspects as land around the villages was developed. See South China Morning Post, October 29, 1980, p.13, and the Sha Tin Master Landscape Plan, pp.19,20, and Appendix H.
42. As quoted by David Aker-Jones, then Secretary of the New Territories, in the South China Morning Post, July 14, 1981.
50. Interview with Kelvin K.W. Chan, Senior Planning Officer, Sha Tin and Northeast District Planning Office, Hong Kong Planning Department, March 1996.
54. Interview with Peter Pun, Director of Planning, Hong Kong Government, Planning Department, March, 1996.