This article concerns how memories are affected by social change and shaped within specific cultural and political contexts. Starting from the local interpretation of a communal hall in a traditional settlement in Hong Kong’s New Territories, it explores some historical background in relation to village alliances and the contested meaning of such a heritage in relation to the armed resistance to British takeover of the New Territories in April 1899. By questioning the identity of the 172 villagers memorialized as “martyrs” on a plaque in the hall and seeking to understand the building’s position in regard to a specific socio-cultural landscape, I attempt to explain recent social change in the New Territories. Most importantly, I explore how the indigenous villagers’ memory was reconstructed to mark the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

In 1995 a Hong Kong television program showed how a traditional hall in the western New Territories village of Ping Shan had been flooded since 1990 because construction of a nearby new-town development had raised the local water level. The building itself had been badly damaged by soaking in water for several years, and its front yard was full of abandoned vehicles (FIGS.1, 2). As late as 1999 this flooding problem had still not been resolved, and some villagers even thought a government conspiracy was involved to destroy the monument. At one local gathering in which I participated, a young village representative claimed the real reason for the hall’s neglect was that the government did not want to reveal its history. He pointed out the hall had served as a center for village resistance to the British takeover of the New Territories in 1898-1899. The villager’s explanation revealed the depth of hostility between the villagers and the government, especially since a plaque in the hall memorialized the death of 172 of their fellows in anti-British uprisings nearly a century before. But it soon became apparent the meaning of the hall was even more complex. Within the present-day socio-political landscape, it potentially served not only as a place for memorializing loyalties, but also for creating a victimized identity among villagers who opposed the outgoing authority of the colonial regime.
Drawing upon Paul Connerton’s understanding of collective memory as it is embedded in the rites and ceremonies of everyday life, I suggest in this article that collective memory may also be installed in built structures, particularly in relation to specific events within a socio-political context. Using as an example the historic narrative of the Ping Shan communal hall (in Cantonese, kung soh), I will investigate how the meanings of such a building have been interpreted (or misinterpreted) to construct memory among the indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories as well as specific topics related to the Tang clan in Ping Shan. Apart from some chapters talking about recent issues of the village, it was initially surprising to me to find the anti-British resistance in the New Territories in 1899 repeatedly mentioned in it. Particularly, two of the chapters focused on the history of the Tang clan villagers’ involvement, as well as the fact that 172 villagers had died in the battle. The information had been provided by local people, and had been written up by a Chinese author from the mainland. This was not the first time I had heard this story. Yet, I had never been able to discover answers to the following questions: Who were these martyrs? When and how did they die? And why were they memorialized in that particular communal hall even though, as I later found out, they were not from nearby villages?

According to many scholarly studies of the history of the New Territories, there seems little doubt that indigenous villagers did participate in a local resistance movement in 1899. However, evidence relating to the number of people who died in battle has never come to light, nor has there emerged any official record of the issue. In previous studies of the New Territories, historians have paid more attention to such questions as the “origins” of different lineages, their routes of migration, the formation of regional alliances, and the sources of local traditions. Alternatively, social and cultural anthropologists studying current conditions in the New Territories have looked into the area’s religions, folk beliefs, lineage organization, and the social changes brought about by industrialization from the 1960s on. However, data about the anti-British movement and the beginning of the colonial era has somehow always remained as a missing link between the periods intensively studied by historians and anthropologists. To better understand how this missing link was created and what its relevant meanings are from a socio-political perspective, I chose to explore the mystery behind the flooded hall in Ping Shan. Considering the changing social context in the New Territories and the emergence of an indigenous identity in the past decade, I wanted to show how collective memory could only be clarified on the basis of anthropological study.

Ping Shan, located in the western part of the New Territories, is the name used to signify several villages that include Hung Tau Tsuen (Valley’s Head Village) and Hang Mei Tsuen (Valley’s Tail Village). In between lies a Tang ancestral hall, which is a principal landmark in the Ping Shan area. (FIGS. 3.4) Historians believe the Tangs, originally from Jiangxi
province, immigrated in the tenth century during the Song dynasty, first to Guangdong, and then to what is now the New Territories in 973 A.D. The present-day Tangs descended from a branch of the earliest settlers in Kam Tin. One author has described their original lands in the area as follows:

Ping Shan is located on fertile land in the New Territories, comprising thirty-six villages. To its east is Yuen Long Town; to the north, Deep Bay. Marked by luxuriant forests, verdant hills and clear springs, Ping Shan was a scenic spot, and its beauty has been compared to the Yang-tzu region. Rice, sweet potatoes and sugar cane were produced in abundance.

These days, of course, the landscape is very different, as Ping Shan is no longer a famous basin for paddy fields, but is surrounded by high-rise residential apartment buildings and shopping malls. But especially on Sundays and public holidays, many tourists come to the area to walk the Heritage Trail that links its remaining ancestral halls.

The flooded hall this paper is concerned with — Tat Tak Kung Soh — is situated at the northern side of Hung Tau Tsuen, near a river that has been reclaimed for modern housing and commercial development (Fig. 5). As for its function, I was told the open area in front of the hall had once served as a marketplace, called Ping Shan Shi (meaning Ping Shan Market), which had been under the management of the Tat Tak Kung Soh. In addition, I was told by local villagers that Tat Tak Kung Soh was originally constructed to provide a meeting place for the merchants from Ping Shan, Ha Tsuen, Pat Heung, Kam Tin, Ping Kong, San Tin, and Tai Po Tau (Fig. 6). Some villagers also mentioned that Tat Tak Kung Soh had been used as meeting place in 1899 to organize the anti-British movement, as well as serving as one of the headquarters for guerrilla bands formed by villagers to resist the British colonial regime.

Despite these local explanations of the building’s history, however, it had become commonplace for scholars to suggest that the 172 martyrs referred to in the hall’s memorial plaque had actu-
ally died in armed conflicts between Ping Shan and other lineage groups before the beginning of the colonial regime. Some brief data related to armed conflict between Ping Shan and neighboring lineage may found in different references. Such references especially mention fighting with Shap Pat Heung in 1851 and frequent fighting with Ha Tsuen. Two specific explanations have been given with regard to such conflicts between village alliances related to Ping Shan. Jack Potter wrote in 1968 that there were a number of armed conflicts between Ping Shan and neighboring lineages such as Shap Pat Heung and Ha Tsuen, and that the headquarters of the Ping Shan regional alliance was a communal hall in which “heroes” were memorialized. Segawa Masahisa suggested in 1991 that the plaque in the flooded hall was dedicated to those who had died in a specific conflict that arose because one of Ping Shan Tang’s ancestral graves (with good feng shui) had been excavated by Shap Pat Heung villagers in the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, a Shap Pat Heung/Ha Tsuen/San Tin alliance had been formed to fight the Ping Shan/Pat Heung alliance, a political context which might explain the large number of deaths recorded among villagers of the latter alliance.

In order to obtain more details of the hall’s history, I met the trustee, or manager, of the Tat Tak Tong, who was the only “owner” of the building and its related properties. However, during my interview, the manager showed no interest in clarifying the communal hall’s history, and repeatedly said he did not consider the plaque to be a memorial to the anti-British resistance. Rather, he said armed conflict between Ping Shan and neighboring villages was the main reason for the plaque. However, this manager had no evidence to either prove or disprove anything. Assuming that Tat Tak Tong might have lands scattered among villages belonging to the alliance, I also asked the manager about those relationships, but failed to obtain any information from him on that topic either. By tracing the records of the Tat Tak Tong trust in the Hong Kong Land Registry, I did manage to discover that the Tat Tak Tong owned a certain amount of land, but only that the land-use status of some of it had been changed from farm to factory during the past two decades.

In the face of such an ambiguous social background, I finally proposed using deduction from various materials — including articles, newspaper archives, government documents, historical village models, and various local records — to examine the above confusion and, if possible, understand the “real story” of the memorial plaque in the communal hall. I proposed writing from an anthropological perspective, even though I would use historical data extensively to investigate social change before and after 1899. I also wanted to find out whether people in Ping Shan had participated in the anti-British movement, as claimed in the brochure. If they had not been so involved, then why was there such bitterness concerning the plaque and the lack of respect given the 172 “martyrs”?

By asking these questions about the meaning of local history and this traditional monument, my study intended to create new insight into the way collective memory is created, dismantled, and re-presented for political interests, often obviating such labels as real/unreal, true/distorted, or factual/imaginary. By comparing sources and contrasting discrepancies, I hoped to
understand what the story of the martyrs memorialized in a hall had to tell about social change in the New Territories during the last century, especially how indigenous inhabitants had constructed a victimized identity that they could use in negotiations with the government during the colonial shift.

HISTORY OF THE LEASED OR NEW TERRITORIES

It may first be useful to provide some background information about villagers in the New Territories. Hong Kong, part of the previous San On County in Guangdong Province, was taken over by the British in the middle of the nineteenth century. While the southern part of the Kowloon Peninsula, Hong Kong Island, and a number of surrounding islands had been ceded to Britain by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, a large additional section of the peninsula, called the New Territories, starting from Boundary Street and extending north to the border with Shenzhen, was only leased to the British Government in 1898 for a period of 99 years. During the colonial era, the Hong Kong British Government was the highest policy-making authority for this “hinterland” area.14

Divided by a mountain range to the east of Pat Heung, almost in its middle, the New Territories are split into eastern and western portions that exhibit great difference in cultural traditions. While the social and political structure of the eastern side of the New Territories was centered at Taipo port, the western side is fertile and flat, inhabited largely by a few settled clans, of which the Tangs are a powerful one. The Tangs, however, like other groups residing here, were not limited to the New Territories, and their lineage network extended to many parts of the Pearl River Delta area. Thus, some settlements on the western side of the mountains were regionally aligned, as well as grouping several lineages together.

By 1899 there were already 700-800 villages, including tsuen (not walled) and wai (walled) settlements, in the New Territories. These were largely organized according to administrative units of heung and yeuk. In South China, heung combined tsuen and wai into an important administrative unit, while yeuk were alliances formed by weak lineages as a means of opposing stronger ones. As an example of this structure, Ping Shan Heung not only included villages within the Ping Shan area, but also some neighboring villages that were related to the Ping Shan Tang clan through ties of land ownership.15 Moreover, Ping Shan Heung formed the central and important part of the Tat Tak Yeuk, though these were not equal. The foci of such multilinage alliances were not ancestral halls, but temples.16

Beginning with the “Convention Respecting an Extension of the Hong Kong Territories,” signed on June 9, 1898, however, such traditional administrative structures were considerably weakened by colonial land policies. And from that time on concerns over land use were constantly at the core of disputes between indigenous villagers and the government. Such disputes derived ultimately from issues of land ownership and the villagers’ confusion about being subjects on leased land. Ever since 1899, when the British first established police stations in the New Territories, the villagers have desired to claim back their full land rights. Hostilities over the issue of began on April 16, 1899, when a British force attempting to hoist the Union Jack on the newly named Flagstaff Hill in Taipo were attacked by villagers from across the New Territories.17

One might ask how much the British government knew about the area before they set out to extend their colonial regime to it. One might also ask what kinds of impacts the colonial regime had on the people there. A good place to start is by examining the anti-British movement and how it began. The resistance action against the colony’s extension most likely took place from March 28 to April 18, 1899. I assume it did not start immediately upon issuance of the proclamation by the San On District Magistrate and the Viceroy of Guangdong regarding the New Territories, signed in Guangzhou on March 27, 1899. But on that same day Captain Superintendent F.H. May (the officer in charge of the Hong Kong Police Force) did visit the New Territories looking for locations for police stations. And with both the proclamation and the British Government’s announcement that it intended to build a police headquarters in Taipo, a village resistance did begin to take shape, which finally led to armed conflict when British officials attempted to move into the leased territories.

One occurrence that has made Ping Shan famous, and that has caused its name to be associated with many references to this resistance, was the content of placards that were posted in the village at the time, such as that posted on March 28, 1899.18 As the historian G.B. Endacott has written, the threats to British workmen were explicit:

On 1 April 1899 Blake reported that British parties were threatened with death and that placards had appeared calling on the people to arm against the British. Blake hurried to Canton and induced the Viceroy to disavow the placards and guarantee protection to British parties in the New Territories, who were there to make arrangements to take over the administration from the Chinese. He threatened that if protection were not given by the following Wednesday, 5 April, he would take over the following day.19

In order to come to a compromise, a second proclamation was issued from the San On District Magistrate and the Viceroy of Guangdong April 4, 1899.20 However, this proclamation did not help much. A day after the British hoisted their flag in Taipo, April 16, 1899 (one day earlier than the original schedule), villagers from all over the New Territories attacked, their numbers swelled by sympathetic fighters from other parts of South China. The village resistance forces, numbering around 2,600, were armed with cannons and rifles. However, organizational problems soon gave the well-equipped British regular army forces an overwhelming advantage, and the British successfully entered the Lam Tsuen Valley leading to the northwestern New Territories, where they launched a final assault on the rebel army in Kam Tin.
The end of resistance and the local villagers’ failure was symbolized by the removal of Kat Shing Wai’s iron gate by the British. Once the British were in firm control of the area, they erected several police stations in the New Territories, one on top of a hill above the Ping Shan villages, overlooking the Tang ancestral hall.

PING SHAN AND THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT OF APRIL 1899

According to books and articles written about the resistance, there can be little doubt that Ping Shan does have a history involving anti-British military action. Moreover, current-day residents remain aware of this local history. However, the number of people who died or were injured in this “battle” has never been mentioned. For a long period of time, people accepted that what happened in 1898-99 was merely “desultory fighting.” However, Robert Groves has pointed out that it would be a mistake to consider the resistance to have been a disorganized movement; in fact, he has claimed it was a well-planned and prepared action (fig. 7). He has particularly pointed to the involvement of the militia unit and Ping Shan’s support for the armed resistance force. Yet, throughout his 1969 article “Militia, Market and Lineage: Chinese Resistance to the Occupation of Hong Kong’s New Territories in 1899,” Groves never revealed the sources of his data. Since no official written document exists reporting the anti-British resistance, I therefore needed to employ other methods to determine whether the plaque in Tat Tak Kung Soh bore any relation to the anti-British movement. This eventually involved collecting and comparing data from three principal sources: newspaper records, oral history from Ping Shan Villagers, and oral history from a knowledgeable person I will call L.

By checking the record of Hong Kong’s newspapers kept in the Public Record office, I found there still exist copies of English papers which can be dated as far back as 1842 (such as Friend of China and Hong Kong Gazette). Since the articles about the New Territories indigenous resistance in different newspapers seemed to be from similar sources, I eventually chose columns from the daily China Mail and Hong Kong Daily Press as a reference, largely because they contained reports from consecutive days. However, although it was reported in these columns that some Chinese were killed, injured or caught, no detailed information was given. Given the nature of these reports, I suspected no journalists had actually been present at the battlefield, and that the data rather came from government officials or other such indirect sources. Even the number of villagers killed and injured, though consistently reported as large, was vague and unclear. Nonetheless, these reports hardly allowed any conclusion other than that some New Territories villagers did die during the fighting. For example, it was mentioned that “the Chinese losses in killed and wounded are reported to be very heavy.” “Numbers killed are not known, but it is thought that they run into hundreds.” “Message was sent over from Taipohu stating that it had been discovered that the shelling of the Asiatic Artillery on Monday was most effective, and projectiles having dropped among the rebels and killed a great many of them.” And, finally, “not able to give the number of rebels killed, but [the villagers] suffered severely.”

My next step was to collect oral history from some Ping Shan villagers about relations between Tat Tak Kung Soh and the anti-British resistance. As related by such informants the follow-

### TIME HAPPENINGS IN THE NEW TERRITORIES

- **July 1898**: New Territories leased for 99 years.
- **August 1898 — March 1899**: British government’s preparation for the formal takeover.
- **March 27, 1899**: First proclamation and May’s search of location for the Police Station.
- **March 28, 1899**: Villagers met in Ping Shan, Kam Tin and Ha Tsuen; 22 representatives from all over the New Territories gathered for the meeting in which six of them were from Ping Shan (biggest group).
- **March 31, 1899**: Village representatives met in Yuen Long.
- **April 1, 1899**: Village representatives met in Sheung U.
- **April 4, 1899**: Second proclamation.
- **March 10, 1899**: Establishment of the Tai Ping Kung Kuk among all villagers participating in the resistance preparation, in Yuen Long Tai Wong Old Temple.
- **April 12, 1899**: A group was sent to meet the Qing troops at Castle Peak Bay but without real fighting.
- **April 13, 1899**: Ping Shan supplied pigs as food for the militia. On April 14, 1899, an advance force was in position on the hills overlooking Tai Po. It was composed of units from Fan Leng, Kam Tin, the Lan Tsuen valley, and Pat Heung.

![Figure 7](image-url)
ing story emerged. The building, Tat Tak Kung Soh, was built during the Xianfeng reign (1851-1861) of the Qing dynasty by the Tang clan of Ping Shan. It was used for market management, in which an organization of 39 villages under the Tat Tak alliance were involved. During the anti-British movement, Tat Tak Kung Soh was used as a base for fund-raising to purchase weapons and gunpowder, and young males were gathered there to serve in the armed resistance. However, after suffering heavy casualties and finally defeat by the British, the resistance movement came to an end. Those who died during skirmishes against the British were greatly honored by their fellow villagers, and soul tablets of those from Yuen Kong, Sha Ha, Wang Chau, Ping Shan, and Sha Kong who had been killed were placed at Tat Tak Kung Soh. It was also mentioned that on the top of the plaque with the 172 martyrs’ names, there is a dated 1939 engraving of “Loyalty and Faith are Honored” that gives evidence of Ping Shan’s participation.

Apart from this version of events, which also could be found in the Tang clan brochure, several other explanations of the plaque in the hall also existed. As I mentioned earlier, the manager of Tat Tak Kung Soh denied that Ping Shan had been substantially involved in the anti-British resistance, and he pointed out that Ping Shan had many gentry who did not know how to fight. However, many documents do show that Ping Shan was somehow involved in the logistics of the armed resistance. One possible reason for this was offered by L, a widely respected and active authority on local history in the New Territories.

During one interview, L told me there were two memorial monuments in Kam Tin erected for those who had died during the anti-British resistance movement. He also claimed that one ancestral hall in Ping Shan did become the headquarters of the resistance movement. When I went to check L’s information, however, I could find no further background on the monuments in Kam Tin. As some villagers told me, this was because local inhabitants were afraid that any relationship with people who participated in the resistance would cause them to be blacklisted and punished. Thus, no names were written on the Kam Tin monuments, which consisted of a monument in the yi-zhong (communal graveyard), and a memorial tablet worshipped in an ancestral hall. The only confirmation that these monuments actually related to the anti-British resistance, therefore, depended on oral history.

During April 1999, one century after it actually took place, I suggested the resistance as a feature story to a journalist working for the South China Morning Post (an English daily). Together, the journalist and I went to interview an elder who was reputed to be well informed about the history of Kam Tin. Even though the resistance happened before he was born, this elder told us that during his childhood, Kam Tin villagers had remained worshiped in an ancestral hall near Kat Shing Wai have nothing written on them. As to why this was the case, I was only told the colonial regime “somehow” suppressed the villagers’ lifeways, and that the resistance was a taboo subject that villagers were afraid to mention.32 Despite the seemingly plausibility of this story, however, the complicated history of the New Territories led me to suspect there might be another dimension to it. For example, I suspected that changes in the socio-cultural landscape in terms of local alliances may also have played a role in the missing history.

From a study during the early 1980s of regional alliances of Pat Heung, Segawa had explained how different local armed conflicts did, in fact, arise (like the hostile relations between Pat Heung and Kam Tin, as well as between Shap Pat Heung and Kam Tin, which can be traced back to the early Qing dynasty — as plaques in the Tai Wong Temple of the Yuen Long Old Market describe). I suspected the formation of such a political alliance between Ping Shan Heung and Pat Heung provided an important clue to understanding how names of villages not belonging to Ping Shan Heung came to be combined with Ping Shan Heung villages on the Tat Tak Kung Soh plaque. These were supposed to be villages joining the Tat Tak alliance — which not only included all the villages of the Ping Shan Heung, but also some villages from Pat Heung. Thus, on the one hand, it might be possible to justify Segawa’s explanation that the Tat Tak alliance was made for economic and political interests. Yet, on the other hand, it might also be possible that the local villagers’ explanation would be reasonable if the former (market) alliance had been transformed into a resistance force during the anti-British movement. Moreover, this rationale would be consistent with Groves’s description of Ping Shan’s role as a source of food and logistics, even though there is no evidence that Ping Shan villagers actually participated in the fight.

About Ping Shan’s participation, I once wrote a newspaper article explaining how the first meeting to organize the anti-British resistance was held in Kun Ting Study Hall, located in Ping Shan. The meeting followed the return of one of Ha Tsuen’s representatives from Sanyuanli, where he had gone to learn how to organize a resistance force against the British. With the agreement of all village representatives, an experienced person came to give advice, and Tungkuan fighters were hired to participate (this seems consistent with newspaper references as to who the anti-British fighters were). Nonetheless, given the assumption that Tat Tak Kung Soh was built during the Xianfeng reign (1851-61), one must also consider the meaning of “Kung Soh” within a historic-political context. Here, I have tried to use F. Wakeman’s study of local political formation, as well as formation of militias, to further understand the function of such regional alliances. He showed how the Sanyuanli resistance and the governor general-sanctioned tian-lien after the Opium War were related to Kung Soh-oriented local forces.”33 Even though he did not give details of alliances in the New Territories, one may speculate there may have been similarities. Hypothetically, Tat Tak Kung Soh might not have been involved in any foreign resistance movements. However, its establishment during the second half of the nineteenth century could still indicate it was a formal force created by villages under the umbrella of the Tat Tak alliance to manage Ping Shan Market and
oppose the Kam Tin, Shap Pat Heung, and Ha Tsuen markets. Thus, the participation of the Tat Tak alliance force during the resistance movement would be plausible.

COMMENORATIVE SPACE FOR THE MEMORY OF RESISTANCE

In How Societies Remember, Connerton pointed out that the difficulty of extracting the past from the present not only stems from the fact that present factors tend to influence recollections of the past, but also that past factors tend to influence one’s experience of the present. He therefore suggested that the study of the social formation of memory should be aimed at investigating those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible. In other words, social memory is not merely the recall of a common past, which may or may not have actually happened, but also the history that is “expected” for the present. Now that I have given an account of the anti-British resistance in 1899 and of the various records and descriptions of it, I would like to draw attention to how memory of the anti-British resistance is embodied by the “martyrs” memorialized in Tat Tak Kung Soh, and what makes the villagers believe in its reality even though there is no direct evidence of it.

Even if such a belief is mistaken, it is significant to find out what kinds of factors contribute to the perception of its truth. In this regard, one can draw upon Connerton’s understanding of social memory as both images and recollected knowledge of the past, and how these are conveyed and sustained by rites as well as performances. Such social devices may in fact be involved in how the armed anti-British resistance has been memorialized, as performances. Such social devices may in fact be involved in how the armed anti-British resistance has been memorialized, as performances.

In their previous study of the effects of development in the New Territories, Jeffrey Cody and James Richardson used the example of the changing face of the Shatin Valley to show how village conservation and redevelopment policies have now become inextricably bound up with such other issues as infrastructure development, village removal, land exchange, inheritance, the colonial government’s small-house policy, and new-town planning. My focus on a particular building here is aimed at furthering current understanding of the ways indigenous villagers have been affected by administrative and infrastructure developments in the New Territories. In particular, my case study provides insight into relations between district policies dealing with the indigenous rights (partly related to the New Territories Ordinance) and the British colonial government.
Today the local organization of the New Territories Village Administration comprises a three-level structure. At one level is the village representative system, which was established during the World War II when Hong Kong was under Japanese rule. This structure allows all villages to be involved in local decision-making, and it further allows representatives from each village to participate in rural committees. Such committees, the second level of local organization, were also established during Japanese rule, but they were later developed by the British to provide a representative structure in each of the 28 administrative areas into which they divided the New Territories after the war. The third level of administrative organization is the Heung Yee Kuk, which began out of administrative organization is the Heung Yee Kuk, which began out of successful local opposition to the government’s proposal for land taxes in 1926, and which now serves is an advisory group to the government on matters related to the New Territories. With the establishment of this three-level structure, one can see how former regional as well as heung politics have been gradually replaced by new institutions. One result is that village matters must today be officially resolved through government-recognized channels, causing traditional linkages between villagers, part of a specific cultural landscape, to disappear, thus making it difficult to trace the history of regional alliances. Tat Tak Kung Soh and the historical background of its alliances may thus have simply faded in local people’s memory as time has passed.

In examining the ethnic identity of indigenous villagers in the New Territories, Chan has pointed out that the term “indigenous inhabitants” was only formally adopted by the Executive Council as part of the small-house policy enacted in 1972. This policy defined such people as the “patrilineal descendants of ancestors who were living in the New Territories villages on 1 July 1898.” Since this small-house policy eventually became one of the most important invented traditions shaping the identity of indigenous inhabitants, the importance of their cultural heritage should not be overlooked.

In Hong Kong, the word “heritage” is largely associated with buildings and monuments. Apart from oral traditions, written record, images, and rituals of “commemoration” which all serve the purpose of transmitting social memory, “space” is an important factor in memory transmission. Such a connection was clearly evident in the reaction of the Ping Shan villagers to the establishment of a police station on the hill behind the main ancestral hall, an action which had destroyed village fung shui. In particular, villagers likened the situation to a large stone crushing a crab (the police station being the large stone, and signifying colonial hegemony; and the lifeways of the villagers being the crab).

Even though there were many occasions on which the government needed to negotiate with the village over (or compensate individuals for) land taken for various development purposes, for many years none of these provided sufficient opportunity for Ping Shan villagers to ask that the police station be torn down. However, the dynamics of this relationship changed when the villagers recognized the power of “traditional monuments” as a bargaining chip. In particular, this awareness emerged with the construction of the Ping Shan Heritage Trail.

In Ping Shan, the hostility latent in this situation came to a head in 1990 when the Tang clan was asked to remove two graves of their ancestors who had been buried 240 years before which were situated in the West New Territories landfill project site [Fig. 8]. The Tang clan refused, and chose instead to “close the Ping Shan Heritage Trail” as a protest against the government’s decision. As one of their subsequent demands, they then asked that the police station be converted for use as their clan’s museum, a change that would symbolize a re-establishment of control over their property, a reaffirmation of their identity, a legitimation of their lifestyle and customs, and a sign of their consistent resistance to British dominance [Fig. 9]. Moreover, establishment of the museum in the former police station would establish the Tang’s identity as freedom fighters, patriots, and descendants of the indigenous villagers who had been defeated in an early military struggle with the British regime.

The closing of the Ping Shan Heritage Trail thus reflected a variety of conflicts from the past century. But it is especially important to realize how it allowed the Tangs to (re)-internalize public heritage, resist political authority, and proclaim their indigenous identity. This identity became more important as the negotiations over the return of Hong Kong to China went on, and as the history of the anti-British resistance was reconstructed in a new political context. Thus, social memory led to a historical reconstruction, and the reconstructed history assumed a new reality when monuments such as Tat Tak Kun Soh became accepted as icons of ethnic identity.

In the end, I therefore speculate that indigenous inhabitants’ reconstructed collective memory of Tat Tak Kung Soh can be interpreted either as an expression of patriotism at the return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty to China, or as a response to the coming uncertainty with regard to Hong Kong’s colonial legacy. The search for identification with the Chinese government through the reconstruction of a patriotic history might further be seen as a way of claiming indigenous rights that might be lost in the future.

**Figure 8.** A local English daily reporting the contestation over the Tang clan grave site. (Photo by author from South China Morning Post, May 3, 1995.)
CONCLUSION

With the increased attention and legitimacy given to oral history, archives, monumental records, and local writings, mainstream historical narrative has been criticized for its lack of realism. Although the historic background of monuments in traditional villages may not always be clearly understood, and mysteries are often encountered while conducting field research, the interpretations given by local villagers remain important sources, often providing insight into social changes in the communities and the values their residents hold.

Controversies, such as those which may arise from the presence of different memories, are an especially common phenomenon when digging out historic-cultural traditions in the New Territories. The political landscape here has been greatly affected by the complex nature of the colonial regime, the impact of extensive urban development, and the desire for cultural preservation. This article has attempted to use a single building in a traditional New Territories settlement as a test case for understanding the identity of indigenous inhabitants through their remembrances.

As shown in the case of Tat Tak Kung Soh in Ping Shan, the reconstruction of such a memory is complicated by the fact that the only remaining relevant documents are those of the British government. The voices of the indigenous villagers were entirely suppressed at the beginning of the colonial regime. Thus, after 99 years, when a new shift in power was underway, martyrs were found and history was reconstructed, but the mysteries could still not be resolved.

Nowadays, because of ongoing preservation and development efforts in the New Territories, traditional buildings and settlements are particularly important to historic narrative and identity formation. Especially at a time when enormous economic power has swept away most regional traditions in Hong Kong, traditional dwellings and settlements often provide the last remaining evidence of a local cultural heritage it is essential to transmit for both educational and historical purposes.

REFERENCE NOTES

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3. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see H.D.R. Baker, A Chinese Lineage Village: Sheung Shui (London: Frank Cass, 1968); N. Constable, Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits:


6. A pai-lou (or gateway) engraved with “Ping Shan Shi” was erected but later demolished near the Tat Tak Kung Soh.


12. In the local practice, some properties inherited from the ancestor are owned by the whole lineage, which are entitled to a trust called Tong. For some legal reasons, the manager, a position created by the British government for convenience in property matters as well as land transactions, became the one who can make decisions for the trust and act as the trustee of all those properties. Tat Tak Tong was named for holding a trust base at the Tat Tak Kung Soh, which actually includes some land properties, and its details can be traced back to 1905 (from the Block Crown Lease Records for Land in the New Territories registered during 1905-7).

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14. Chinese residents, more than 95 percent of the total population, were still given enough religious, academic, press and economic freedoms so that there was comparatively little hostility towards the British.

15. In most cases, Ping Shan Tangs had the bottom-soil ownership, and their neighboring villagers had the top-soil ownership.

16. As J. Brim pointed out in Local Systems and Modernizing Change in the New Territories of Hong Kong (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1971), village-alliance temples were actually important local-level social organizations.

17. See “The Hoisting of the Flag at Taipu,” Hong Kong Telegraph, April 15, 1899.

18. “We hate the English barbarians, who are about to enter our boundaries and take our land and will cause us endless evil. Day and night we fear the approaching danger. Certainly people are dissatisfied at this and have determined to resist the barbarians. On the one hand we shall be helping the (Chinese) government; on the other we shall be saving ourselves from future troubles. Let all our friends and relatives bring their firearms to the ground and do what they can to expatriate the traitors. Our ancestors will be pleased and so will our neighbors. This is our sincere wish.” (Translated and quoted in Chun, “The Land Revolution,” p.2).

19. See Endacott, A History of Hong Kong, p.263.

20. According to the Hong Kong Government Gazette, 1899, p.1559. Whereas Kowloon was leased under instructions from the Emperor, and the boundary was defined in accordance with the original map forwarded by the Tsungli-Yamen, the following agreement was arrived at with foreign officials:

1. The people are to be treated with exceptional kindness.

2. There can be no forced sale of houses and lands.

3. The graves in the leased territory are never to be removed.

4. Local customs and habits are to remain unchanged according to the wishes of the inhabitants.

21. The gate was kept in England until 1925, when it was shipped back to Kat Shing Wai in Kam Tin.

22. See Endacott, A History of Hong Kong, p.265.

23. Groves’s article (“Militia, Market and Lineage”) has been considered an important piece about the anti-British armed resistance in 1899. In it, Ping Shan is mentioned four times.

These are as follows: (i) as a potential location for the police station because the officer in charge of the Hong Kong Police Force visited Ping Shan on 27th March, and afterward three meetings were held in Ping Shan, Kam Tin and Ha Tsuen (p.43) — also because, among the 22 representatives from various districts in Yuen Long, Ping Shan had the largest group — six people (p.44); (ii) as a food (pig) supplier for the militia (p.49); (iii) because from Ping Shan, militia were sent to Castle Peak (another way to approach the hinterland) in order to confuse the Qing troops sent from Kowloon City (p.50); and (iv) that Ping Shan was involved in the resistance movement (brief mention, p.53).


31. See Wesley-Smith, Unequal Treaty.

32. Regarding the management of the New Market, Hop Yick Company was set up not only for renting shops, but also playing a role in charitable affairs and settling disputes among villagers.


