Heritage of Disappearance? Shekkipmei and Collective Memory(s) in Post-Handover Hong Kong

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This article examines the ways in which visions of working-class life are being reimagined as “collective memory” in Hong Kong’s post-handover period, amidst growing calls to preserve the city’s past. It focuses on changing interpretations of the Shekkipmei Estate and Hong Kong’s public housing program, and on the current proposal to redevelop Shekkipmei while preserving one fragment of it as a housing museum. The analysis aims to unsettle often taken-for-granted assumptions behind the terms “heritage” and “collective memory.” It also questions the role of historic preservation with respect to trajectories of economic development and ongoing political change.

In January 2005 an exhibition was launched in Hong Kong at an unusual venue—several of the residential units in an old, rundown public housing project known as Shekkipmei Estate. Titled “People’s Museum at Shekkipmei,” the exhibit featured re-created housing interiors that recounted ways of life at Shekkipmei from the 1950s to the present. Although modest in scale, the event was nonetheless significant in at least two respects. First, it was the highlight of a series of activities celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of what was hailed as Hong Kong’s “public housing revolution” — started by the British colonial government on this very site in 1955. Second, it previewed a more elaborate housing museum that would be installed in a preserved block of the estate after the rest of the site was cleared for redevelopment in the following year (fig. 1).

The museum proposal generated quite a stir. Other recent cases of preservation had involved prolonged negotiations over land issues and hard campaigning by preservation activists. But the official proposal to save the last remaining “Mark I block” of Hong Kong’s earliest public housing estate has received widespread support from the start. Although few argue that these crumbling, rundown 1950s housing blocks possess much

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architectural merit, strong public consensus has emerged that the estate provides important testimony to the “coming-of-age” of Hong Kong. Hong Kong’s miraculous rise to First World economic status is often attributed to the many working-class immigrants who lived in these humble buildings (figs. 2, 3). And stories in official and popular media have underscored the historical significance of Shekkipmei and its potential to proudly commemorate the rise of a society of poor refugees to become Hong Kong’s present affluent middle class. To quote from one of the many articles praising the project: “a housing museum portraying starkly and factually the marvel that was Shekkipmei would be a tribute to the men and women who survived the darkest hours and who pressed on with grit, determination and a wry grin to build modern Hong Kong.”

The description indeed fits well with the familiar “Hong Kong story,” so often invoked in the official histories of the colonial period: of an ingenious, hardworking Chinese population guided by a benevolent British administration, which succeeded against the odds to develop Hong Kong into a modern, prosperous city. Since the handover of the territory to Chinese control, this narrative has also been adopted by the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (the SAR government) — except that the words “British” and “colonial” have been replaced simply by “the Hong Kong government” (allowing the new authority to fully associate itself with the institutions of the past). However, while glorifying the successes of the former colonial government’s housing program, the SAR government has also taken steps to scale it back in keeping with its avowed commitment to market-based policies. Although this move contradicts the housing program’s assumed “historical” role to provide tenured shelter for the masses, it has gained support not only from the business
sector, but more significantly perhaps, from a growing number of middle-income small property investors, some of whom continue to live in public housing themselves. The aim of this article is not to uncover certain hidden “truths” masked by official rhetoric, however, but to consider some of the ways the dominant discourse of a “modern Hong Kong society” has been continuously reproduced and appropriated through particular representations under changing political and economic imperatives. Specifically, it focuses on ambiguities surrounding interpretations of Shekkipmei and the public housing program, and the contradictory ways in which visions of past working-class life are being reimagined as “collective memory” in the post-handover period. By juxtaposing the various efforts to recollect, and indeed regulate the past in the present, the article aims to unsettle certain taken-for-granted assumptions behind the terms “heritage” and “collective memory” in Hong Kong. By doing so, it also seeks to question the role of historic preservation, an inherently contested arena that can never be divorced from dominant local interests.

Although the case of Shekkipmei is historically specific to Hong Kong, the article also illustrates more generally how conceptions of the past are constantly mobilized by contradictory forces of the present. It is only by recognizing the gaps and fissures within the narratives surrounding so-called “collective memory” that a better understanding of social transformation can be achieved, particularly with regard to the constant negotiations and struggles that are subjugated in the process. Such inquiry is urgent, and indeed necessary, in the current context of neoliberal economic restructuring, as a deepening social divide is increasingly washed over by the rhetoric of progress and the celebration of upward mobility. Such a longstanding ideology continues to perpetuate inequality and discrimination against “unsuccessful” underclasses such as those who have been excluded from the “Hong Kong success story.”

RECOLLECTING THE PRESENT PAST

Hong Kong’s public housing estates are arguably one of the city’s most familiar urban forms (Fig. 4). Since its emergence in the mid-1950s in response to the crisis generated by an influx of refugees from China, Hong Kong’s public housing program has grown to become the largest such program in the world, at one point accommodating half of the city’s population. However, despite this omnipresence, life in older housing estates such as Shekkipmei is seen by many members of the present generation as belonging to a fading era. Increasingly, those living in the oldest estates with the most minimal amenities tend to be poor, single, elderly men and women whose family members have long since moved to better accommodations. This demographic shift has caused these already dilapidated buildings to appear even more desolate among their modern highrise neighbors — a far cry from decades ago when they were taken to represent a well-organized industrializing society undergoing rapid development.

But the distancing from Hong Kong’s immigrant-turned-working-class origins, as well as from the so-called “darkest period of the past,” has been paralleled by an explo-

Figure 4. Birds-eye view of the Shekkipmei Estate showing different phases of its development. Photo by author.
sion of interest in these soon-to-be demolished 1950s housing blocks. Along with the other fast-disappearing privately owned tenements that once dominated the city, these old structures have increasingly become privileged subjects of documentation by journalists and photographers (fig. 5). Thus, in 2000, when the redevelopment proposal for Shekkipmei was released, there were already a handful of publications on Hong Kong’s “commonplace heritage” that referred not to high-style architecture, but to ordinary buildings historically associated with the working class. Often illustrated with beautifully composed black-and-white photographs, many invoked the notion of “collective memory” — which has become a talking point in the media, and been cited by preservationists in support of battles to save old buildings from the wrecking ball.

The surge of popular interest in documenting Hong Kong’s past and salvaging its tangible fragments seems to have suddenly overturned the long-held perception that Hong Kong tears down its buildings before they get “old.” And it has prompted many commentators to search for explanations for this “mental change.” A common thread linking these responses involves the return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty to China in 1997. Today this is viewed as a major rupture that caused Hong Kong residents to search for their own cultural identity for the first time. Preservation is thus understood as a reflex to decolonization, the result of a changed relation to culture and history. Some writers, including preservation advocates, see the phenomenon as a positive sign of a growing “historical consciousness.” But other critics dismiss it as mere nostalgia among people trying to hold on in uncertain times to the illusory image of a “safer” past. Although any preserved image may serve as “communal history,” as pointed out by Ackbar Abbas, in Hong Kong such images are often deliberately altered and sanitized, which only leads to a further aestheticization of the past.

But whether the new preoccupation with the past is really a self-awakening, or merely nostalgia, it is worth noting how the recent discourse on heritage is itself the product of historical change. Thus, if Hong Kong’s handover to China is indeed a rupture that has prompted a “collective” contemplation of the past, it has not been manifested in the same way for all groups of people. Indeed, the so-called present-day “popularization of heritage” can be seen as a set of contesting dynamics that continue to unfold in multiple domains, and which in turn have produced varying effects in social life. It would thus seem fruitful to pay closer attention to how some of these dynamics actually play out on the “ground” — sometimes in rather unexpected ways.

Take, for instance, the recent proliferation of publications on Hong Kong’s heritage, including everything from popular magazines, to commercial adverts, to tourist guidebooks provided by government agencies and independent writers. Whether or not these portray an aestheticized or romanticized image, they provide new ways for tourists and locals to look at the contemporary city, seeking out elements that would otherwise go unnoticed. In tandem are many new personal websites and discussion blogs of “old Hong Kong,” where photographs of newly discovered “old” sites are posted along with expressive sentiments about the past (fig. 6). Another consequence of historical change, which seems to have had a more direct political impact, is the growing number of community campaigns to protect old buildings that may lack “monumental quality,” but are believed to be invested with “collective memory” and “social significance.” These campaigns have gathered support across different sectors, and have exerted pressure on the SAR government to formulate a new preservation policy that gives legal protection to a wider range of built forms (fig. 7). At the same time, this new “preservation movement” has opened up alternative channels for the government and political actors.

![Figure 5](image1.jpg)

**Figure 5.** Cover of Postmagazine featuring the rooftop of a housing block of the Shekkipmei Estate. In recent years there has been a marked increase in publications on what is being referred to as Hong Kong’s “commonplace heritage.”

![Figure 6](image2.jpg)

**Figure 6.** One of the many websites that displays photos of Shekkipmei and other early public housing estates in Hong Kong. Photo by author.
Increasingly, the rhetoric of “protecting Hong Kong’s heritage” has become not only a means to project a positive image in policy addresses, but to help legitimize, usually with some twists in phrasing, new projects where heritage preservation is only part of an “overall development strategy.” Thus, in the presentations of many new development proposals, images of “heritage buildings” — either preserved or re-created anew — are often posed as counterparts to modern architecture. In this way a new twist is added to the familiar story of Hong Kong’s success: after decades of rapid growth, the city has now come of age, and should turn its attention to “history” and “culture.”

It can be conjectured that the “official turn” toward preservation has been both pragmatic and ideological. Specifically, it has been underpinned by the SAR government’s attempt to foster collective solidarity and bolster its legitimacy at a critical historical moment, when the transfer of Hong Kong’s sovereignty coincided with the Asian financial crisis that halted a three-decade-long economic boom. The post-handover period has thus shaken the old relations of the government and the governed — relations that had already been put into flux by the change of sovereignty and growing demands for democratic participation. It is no accident, therefore, that the forceful call for building a strong sense of history and culture via preservation and other means has emerged in the midst of political change, economic pessimism, and simmering discontent. However, while the avowed commitment to protecting Hong Kong’s heritage seems to resonate with popular sentiment, the actual implementation of a preservation policy has proven far more difficult. This is not only because, as elsewhere, preservation inevitably involves resolving a host of competing interests, but more fundamentally because it has set itself against a long-established development discourse in Hong Kong. Entrepreneurial property activity has long been key to the profitability of many Hong Kong corporations, a primary source of revenue for the government, and an important generator of wealth for many average citizens who speculate on real estate investments. All of these interests were indirectly assisted by an unusual set of land policies that continue to discourage the preservation of old buildings.

But there is another, bigger irony in the SAR government’s effort to recall the “Hong Kong can-do spirit.” By constantly referring to the difficult life of the older working class — invariably portrayed as hardworking, pragmatic people who cared more about economics than politics — it has further incited nostalgia for colonial rule under the British. In the eyes of many people the colonial government was more capable of governing Hong Kong than the present regime, and, ironically, more ready to stand up for the “people’s interest,” including the now widespread desire to implement universal suffrage. The paradox illustrates that the
ways in which Hong Kong’s “good old days” are remembered are far from settled. The so-called “collective memory” of the past, just like the term “collective interest” (constantly invoked by political actors today), is composed of contested elements that leave it open to changing appropriation.

SHEKKIPMEI AS COLLECTIVE MEMORY(S)

How, then, is it possible to make sense of the overwhelming enthusiasm for preserving part of Shekkipmei as a museum? While there is no doubt that the old estate has been widely regarded as a “testimony” to Hong Kong’s economic success, a closer look at the sentiments that revolve around it seems to indicate that “success” does not necessarily mean the same thing to all who support Shekkipmei’s preservation. For example, in a featured article by Kevin Sinclair, a popular columnist for the South China Morning Post, Shekkipmei was described as “grim, dreary, ugly and drab.” But he added that, “for the refugees, the poor, the miserable, the unwanted, the housing estate was heaven.” After a recent visit, he wrote:

Some people today look at Shekkipmei and feel embarrassment and shame. I view the crumbling slabs with awe, respect and a sense of achievement. . . . To the residents, it is home, with a community warmth and affection missing in places where residents are blessed with money, status, and power.27

Although, like many others, Sinclair is affirming the historical significance of Shekkipmei and the public housing program, his critique of the building’s condition, his labeling of the residents, and his admiration for the now-lost “community spirit” go beyond the official bounds of the Hong Kong story. Sinclair is a British expatriate and long-time resident of Hong Kong (and someone who never lived in the estate himself); for him, Shekkipmei seems a reminder of a somewhat romanticized colonial era, when benevolence and paternalism underscored the rule of a regime that won a reputation for prudence and efficiency in guiding Hong Kong to its “economic miracle.”28

On the other hand, for the SAR government, which came to power on the eve of the Asian financial crisis, and has since been under pressure to cut back the housing program and other colonial-era welfare practices, the point of the Shekkipmei story is much less about government benevolence and paternalism than the self-actualization of a Hong Kong people who are resilient, hardworking and harmonious in “nature.” In other words, the SAR government’s re-presentation of Shekkipmei is more than simply a reminder of the good old days when the economy was doing well. It also implies a message to those who are disillusioned today to refocus their energy on improving their prospects, rather than challenging the government’s legitimacy. Just like the older working class who are depicted as having always given their trust and compliance to their colonial master, the new authority is now asking that this “winning formula” be reinvigorated.

A telling reference to this discourse of a harmonious society and working-class ethic of determination came in the annual budget speech by Anthony Leung, the SAR’s financial secretary during a worsening recession in 2002. Instead of ending his speech with an anticipated forward-looking statement, Leung recited the lyric of a theme song for a 1970s television series called “Below the Lion Rock,” about working-class families living in a public housing estate (fig. 9).29 The sentimental lyrics underscore the “collective spirit” of Hong Kong people who — to paraphrase — have proven they can excel again and again under the most adverse conditions by clinging to each other as if in the same boat. Leung’s well-received speech caused instant renewed interest in the show, which was replayed shortly afterwards on Hong Kong’s two main TV channels and reproduced on DVDs.30
It is tempting to conclude that the popularity of the lyrics had indeed come to represent a “collective memory” of Hong Kong’s working class — which, after all, had “collectively” moved upward in social terms during the past three decades of economic boom. However, it seems that for the majority of this population, the invocation of working-class life in early public housing is not so much a reminder of their so-called hardworking “nature,” as highlighted by Leung, as it is a source of pride and confirmation of their success in leaving that life behind. To many members of today’s middle class, whose parents spent half their lifetime in public housing, looking back to this past is energizing only by way of contrast to a present that is more affluent, modern and superior. Seen this way, Sinclair’s lamentation of the loss of “community spirit” among those who now have money and power is indeed somewhat ironic when placed against Leung’s pledge for recuperating collective solidarity by looking back to those humbler days.

This point brings up another pertinent question. It is obvious that the popularity of “Below the Lion Rock” extends far beyond those who live, or once lived in public housing. How can this widespread resonance be explained? To put it another way, why is the story of public housing appealing to so many people today when public housing itself is no longer a desirable option?

If the recollection of memories is, as discussed earlier, always contingent upon the dynamics and demands of the present, then the distancing from Hong Kong’s working-class origins does not mean that the past is simply fading away with time. Rather, in the course of evoking “a” collective memory, such as Leung’s recitation of the 1970s song lyric or the re-presentation of the material traces of Shekkipmei through an exhibition, the past working-class life is abstracted and recomposed as evidence of a common “history.” Yet, as the varied interpretations presented above also show, this dominant narrative, so to speak, can never become fully dominant, essentially because the particular material relations embedded within Hong Kong’s industrializing economy propagated very different historical experiences — not only between different social groups, but within the same group of people whose social status had shifted over time.

In seeking to utilize the past to narrate the diverse and multiple versions of the Hong Kong success story, the present is also necessarily presented as a utopian conclusion of history — not in the sense of reaching the apex of development, but in terms of cementing a particular model of development centered on upward mobility and maximization of individual capability. This model, which already fits well with today’s neoliberal ideology, was arguably already in place early on in Hong Kong’s economic development. The fact that so many of the former working poor have become wealthy and successful within half their lifetime is taken as affirmation that hard work and self-initiative should “naturally” lead to spectacular advancement. The concomitant of this neoliberal logic, of course, is that those who are not “successful” have only themselves to blame. As emblematic of a program that once housed half of Hong Kong’s population, Shekkipmei therefore also has the ability to represent the mythical origin of the Hong Kong success story, in which past practices, now construed as “collective memory,” can be employed to justify the trajectories of the present.

However, perhaps the most ironic part of the story is that, given the historical significance of Shekkipmei, its power as testimony of the “coming-of-age” of Hong Kong cannot be fully manifested until it becomes the “past” itself. Only by anticipating the estate’s eventual demolition and the preservation of a fragments of it as “heritage,” can it be reconceived as a “collective memory of the people,” to be looked back upon repeatedly with affection and admiration. In this sense, the emphasis on the “backwardness” and strangeness of the old estates, which are fast becoming a rarity in urban Hong Kong, is exactly what is needed by various groups to reaffirm their achievements and association with the touchstone of Hong Kong’s economic progress (FIG.10). But in the process of reinterpreting Shekkipmei as the “evidence” of history, the actually existing spaces of the buildings and the actual life of the 13,000 tenants still living there are made even more irrelevant than ever in the modern world. Like the soon-to-be-demolished buildings treasured by photographers and architectural enthusiasts, these men and women, among the poorest of Hong Kong’s population, are abstracted into the image of a group left behind by economic and social progress.

This point is clear in the photographs of Shekkipmei and other old estates portrayed in the media and elsewhere.

With a few exceptions, these exhibit two central themes: the sober, empty spaces of the crumbling housing blocks; and lonesome old tenants in front of their dilapidated housing blocks (fig. 11). Yet, as indicated in comments posted on many websites, these photographs were not taken without challenge. Visitors to the estates often encountered unfriendly residents who refused either to let them take pictures or venture into other parts of the buildings. Despite these complaints, however, most news accounts and commentaries seem sympathetic to the estate tenants, who are often referred to as the “stubborn old folks” who are “just the way they are.” Whether or not these observers are really interested in the “old folks” or sympathetic to their “miserable life,” what comes through most clearly is a particular way of seeing Shekkipmei and its residents as an extraordinary image of a place, representing the end of an era, to be looked on with empathy and fascination. At the same time, the urge to salvage and preserve this image as Hong Kong’s “common heritage” provides a conclusion to the story of Shekkipmei — as well as an introduction to its reincarnation as a new development for the well-to-do.

In a different format, this image is also present in the “People’s Museum” exhibition at Shekkipmei, in which the history of Hong Kong’s public housing is displayed by re-created interiors of four periods. While the narrative recounts the familiar story of the rise of Hong Kong’s working class, the emphasis here is on their material progression: from having little in the 1950s, to improving their living conditions in the 1960s, to accumulating an increasing amount of consumable goods in the more affluent 1970s (fig. 12). The fourth and last period, the present, is, however, represented by the dilapidated interiors occupied by the current elderly tenants. Along with other remaining old housing estates, Shekkipmei is thus depicted as having turned into an “elderly village” in recent years, from which most younger people moved long ago (fig. 13). This true-to-life exhibition thus reinforces the “irrelevance” of the present estate itself, and by doing so, marks the end of the Shekkipmei story.

In celebrating and commemorating the success of the “common people,” the “People’s Museum” exhibit thus indirectly serves to justify the need to demolish and redevelop the estate. Amidst all the simmering passion to recollect and preserve “old Hong Kong,” the future is seen as embodying continuing progress underpinned by an ideology of upward mobility. Indeed, the site of Shekkipmei itself will manifest this discourse as it is transformed into an arena for speculative gain in the private housing market.
As the preceding discussion shows, the image of Shekkipmei is constructed of multiple memories and associations, which, despite their differences, work together to support a powerful discourse of redevelopment derived from the experiences of past economic advancement. It is also worth noting that the associations in each sub-version of this story involve contrasts that are dependent on the progress of time. Shekkipmei’s “irrelevance” is made apparent only by conceiving of its former (and therefore already obsolete) role as an enabler of the poor, and its potential as a site of future investment to benefit today’s middle class. Visual presentations are crucial in these conceptions, but they are supported by specific language that conjures up further imaginaries. As noted, one of the most notable is the reference to Shekkipmei and other old housing estates as “elderly villages.” With many of their current tenants being old people who survive on welfare subsidies, they are seen to have little future should they remain the way they are.

But the “future” being referred to here is clearly one conceived almost entirely out of an ideology of upward mobility and calculations of monetary profit. It is thus a future in which the remnant elderly population, themselves part of a past “admirable working class,” are not qualified to share. The perception of who is worth more and less in Hong Kong provides justification for the prioritization of social resources. In other words, the portrayal of the elderly as an “undeserving underclass” who no longer contribute to economic progress provides a once-and-for-all explanation for why they receive little support from the government — and often even from their own family members who have already moved out of this “undesirable” living environment. The idea of living on welfare has historically been scorned in a city that continues to uphold the merit of hard work and self-reliance — a belief that ironically was built on the largest welfare program in the world.

Today, although the elderly can survive on the small “old-age pension” available to poor seniors, the amount is so scant that few can afford any additional amenities. But the most pressing difficulty remains forced displacement as a result of pending redevelopment. Although offered opportunities to move to other public housing areas, the options are extremely limited for those at the bottom of the income ladder. If they are not able to pay the higher rent at a newer estate, they can only move to other old housing blocks, which themselves face eventual demolition.

However large a group they may be, the elderly are also not the only people living in the old housing estates. In this regard, reference to the estates as “elderly villages” also downplays problems faced by their remaining younger residents. Indeed, these people often find themselves ostracized by their schoolmates or refused jobs because of their addresses. Persistent discrimination against current tenants (many of whom are ashamed of where they live) is hugely ironic when compared to the positive sentiment most people express toward preserving Shekkipmei as a “commonplace heritage.” It is, of course, those who have never lived
there who are most likely to exclude those who do as “Others” with no presence in Hong Kong’s “collective memory.” Conversely, the estate residents are among the only people who display little interest in the exhibition at Shekkipmei and the museum proposal. As explained by one resident, the old estates are certainly not a great place to live, but they are still home. Current residents’ concern is first and foremost for compensation in terms of resettlement — not preservation of the old buildings. Some who live in the same block as the exhibition even said they did not have a clue of what the exhibit was about.42

The stigma imposed on the current public housing tenants also makes it clear that the sequential progression and improvement of working-class life is much less clear-cut than as presented in the “People’s Museum” and other official and unofficial narratives. While the harsh living conditions of the past are often emphasized, most descriptions barely mention the social problems experienced by present residents. It could be argued that this deliberate exclusion is necessary to tell a convincing story of success, in which the former working class represent an ideal model of Hong Kong citizens who are upwardly mobile, increasingly sophisticated, and “cultured.”

But this image of the ideal citizen, as with the image of Shekkipmei itself, is not stable. This point can be illustrated by revisiting a set of images that belong to another time. In 1962, Hong Kong’s industrialization had just taken off, and its public housing program had begun to symbolize a well-organized society under the rule of a benevolent administration. Official photographs in both local and international media featured magnificent perspectives of housing estates along with close-up shots of happy-looking Chinese youths, presented as model citizens (FIGS. 14, 15). However, at the same time, local films, TV shows, and popular fictions frequently conveyed imaginations that related to, but sometimes

**FIGURE 15.** (RIGHT) A visitor posing in front of a group of children at a public housing estate in the 1960s. Source: Private collection of a retired officer of the Resettlement Office.
exceeded or subverted, the official portrayal of a “harmonious” society. These stories often highlighted the difference between the ways of life of the working class and those of the private-property-owning middle class and elite. Many stories concerned the move from “immigrant” to having “made it” as part of the privileged upper class. In both the “official” and the “popular” representations, however, the idea of Hong Kong as an entrepreneurial city where one could gain rapid advancement through hard work has been an ongoing myth — one that has served to legitimize a highly unequal society with a profound lack of political participation.40

SITES OF IRONY AND DISCRIMINATION

Throughout the past four decades, during which Hong Kong has been transformed into an advanced economy, there have been ongoing processes of identity formation occurring in different domains of social life. Public housing has been a key site in which such processes occurred, and has significantly shaped the development of class consciousness and social stratification. While Shekkipmei and other early housing estates continue to be a central component of the Hong Kong story, the ways in which it has been used to represent Hong Kong society and its people have changed over time. As discussed here, there have been differences between the official narratives of the colonial government in the 1960s and the SAR government in the post-handover period — with the former emphasizing paternalistic benevolence, and the latter the self-initiative of the working class. However, what has been consistent is that both have attempted to define an ideal model of Hong Kong citizen in alignment with the contemporary political and economic order. In both cases, these models of citizenship have also been taken on and appropriated, and sometimes subverted, in the self-representation of the populous. The aspirations that characterize these narratives evidence the constant negotiations entailed in the transformation of Hong Kong’s society, and the continual shift in social relations and material life underpinned by a widely held ideology of upward mobility.

Popular support for the preservation of Shekkipmei as a “commonplace heritage” today can, in part, be seen as the attempt by various groups to look back to the past for reassurance in an unsettling present. But in seeking to re-present the “collective memory” of a “common people” who have moved upward from a humbler life, those who actually still live in the old housing estates, along with the buildings themselves, have been abstracted into an nostalgic image that works only to erase the actual historical conditions of working-class life. As this article has attempted to show, these representations were conceived out of boundary-drawing processes that continues to propagate discrimination against the disadvantaged.

The Hong Kong story is thus an ironic story in a sense — a celebration of humble beginnings, of working class and immigrant success in a city that continues to marginalize its poor, its working class and immigrants. It also shows the incompleteness and instability of the narratives surrounding preservation and memories of working-class life. And it touches on the processes in which social control, capitalistic development, and identity formation, are inexorably intertwined.

REFERENCE NOTES

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1. The term “post-handover period” refers to the time since the return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty to the People’s Republic of China from Britain on July 1, 1997.
2. The temporary exhibition was held at Block 18 of the Shekkipmei Estate from January to September 2005. The proposed block to be preserved is Block 41, which is also one of the earliest blocks erected on the site. Details of the exhibition can be found on the exhibition website: http://www.naac.org.hk/skm/index.htm
3. “Shekkipmei Museum Recalls home
4. At the time of writing, the demolition of the rest of the buildings of Shekkipmei was already underway. The decision on the preservation of Block 41 is currently on hold, awaiting further study by the Housing Department.
5. Recent high-profile campaigns against the demolition of heritage buildings include the battle to save the Wanchai and Central Markets. Both campaigns involved the active participation of professional bodies, including the Hong Kong Institution of Architects, which in recent years has become actively engaged in promoting heritage preservation in Hong Kong. Although these two campaigns were ultimately unsuccessful, they generated significant public attention, and become a talking point in the media.
6. The H-shaped “Mark I” and “Mark II” blocks were the earliest prototype housing blocks designed for the public housing program by the Public Works Department. During the period 1954–1964, approximately 240 of these basic blocks were built to accommodate around 500,000 people. See Y.M. Yeung and M. Wu, “Introduction,” Fifty Years of Public Housing in Hong Kong: A Golden Jubilee Review and Appraisal (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), p.8.
8. The key infrastructure of the colonial administration, along with all its civil servants, were retained and transferred to the authority of the SAR government after Hong Kong’s handover. This included the Housing Authority and the Housing Department, the two main departments responsible for managing the public housing program.
9. When the first SAR Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, assumed office in 1997, he promised to expand the public housing program by providing an additional 85,000 owner-occupied units to help the low-to-middle-income population become homeowners. However, after the Asian financial crisis and the subsequent crash in the property market, he changed course and proposed the gradual reduction of public housing as a way of supporting property prices.

10. The idea of upward mobility in Hong Kong has historically been closely tied to investment in property. This is not only because the move to private ownership from living in government housing has been a major class distinction within the territory, but because the dramatic gains in property values from the 1970s to 1990s made such investment a cause and indicator of prosperity. The huge decline in the property market in the period following 1997 thus not only led to a loss of wealth among the middle and upper class, but also shook their faith in upward mobility.

11. While preservation often claims to be a practice that is politically neutral, the ways in which “heritage values” are designated in preservation projects inherently elevate certain values and associations while subjugating others. Although there has been a considerable increase in community participation in heritage preservation in recent years, the tendency is toward cooptation with commercial interests and commodification of sites.

12. Although the number of people living in public housing has been steadily declining in the last few years, it still houses about 40 percent of Hong Kong’s population. For a general view of the relationship between public housing and economic development in Hong Kong, see M. Castells, L. Goh, and R.T.W. Kwok, The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore (London: Pion Limited, 1990).

13. As explained by the elderly tenants of these estates, some family members emigrated to other overseas countries as well.

14. See, for example, D. Chamber, In the Heart of the Metropolis: Yaumatei and Its People (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company Limited, 1997).

15. Because Hong Kong’s housing and land policies discourage preservation, the average building life expectancy is only about thirty years. For an account of the dynamics surrounding Hong Kong’s preservation and development, see J. Cody, “Heritage as Hologram,” in W. Logan, ed., The Disappearing Asian City: Protecting Asia’s Urban Heritage in a Globalizing World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.185–207.

16. As mentioned earlier, there has been a sizable increase in the number of publications on Hong Kong’s heritage in recent years. Some books have been written by academic architectural historians, who have dedicated themselves to historic preservation in Hong Kong not only by writing texts but by teaching and through community service. Some even play an advisory role in policymaking. It can be argued that their efforts have significantly raised awareness of Hong Kong’s history in the last few years, especially in regard to linking preservation with the larger issues of urban planning and sustainability.

17. See A. Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), p.83. In his essay on Hong Kong’s architecture, Abbas asserted that preservation in Hong Kong “is not a return of past memory, but a return of memory to the past.” However, for Abbas, the recent surge of interest in preserving the past does not indicate the emergence of a critical “postcoloniality,” which would be required to unsettle the dominant narrative of Hong Kong’s history.

18. Many of these websites are setup by young people with an interest in photography and architecture. A look at the discussion on these sites is instructive, as the past being referred to here is obviously partially imagined. The varied narratives also show that they display a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward Hong Kong’s history — something that does not seem to fit well either with the official “Hong Kong story” or the “diagnosis” offered by cultural commentators.

19. In order to give legal protection to a building in Hong Kong, it needs to be graded as a heritage building and officially declared a monument. “Monumental quality” here refers to the special architectural characteristics that qualified the building as “heritage.” Details of the criteria and grading procedures of monuments are outlined in the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance enacted in 1976.

20. In February 2004 a consultation document named “Review of Built Heritage Conservation Policy” was released by the Home Affairs Bureau to solicit public opinions on establishing heritage policy.

21. A case in point is the newly completed Star Ferry Pier whose “Edwardian” design is based on a re-creation of a former 1912 pier demolished in the 1950s. The existing 1952 pier, which was designed according to a functionalist style, will be demolished once the new pier is put into operation at the end of 2006.

22. One example of such effort is the formation of the Cultural and Heritage Commission in 2000. The purpose of this advisory body is to give recommendations to the SAR government on the long-term policies and funding priorities in the development of culture in Hong Kong. The commission has since held a series of workshops and public consultations and published two reports containing policy recommendations. However, to date no new policies have yet been set in place based on the recommendations.

23. The Asian financial crisis, which began in 1997, had significant economic impact throughout the region, and in Hong Kong the property market went through a deep multiyear slump. More important than the direct effects was the damage to the confidence in the future that had assumed the coming years would see the start of the “Asian Century.”

24. These demands for greater political participation had in part been precipitated by the democratic experiments carried out by the last colonial administration in the years running up to 1997. However, they were rolled back immediately by the SAR government after the handover.

25. Hong Kong has long prided itself on its “laissez-faire” credentials, and therefore has historically been hesitant to prevent entrepreneurs from developing property in the way they see fit. The government has also been accustomed to deriving a considerable portion of its revenue from land sales as well as from the payment of fees for any change of land use. For example, the destruction of old buildings and their replacement with apartment blocks has in the past been a substantial source of wealth for both private
developers and the government.

26. The forceful push for universal suffrage by Hong Kong’s last governor, Chris Patten, led to an almost complete breakdown of communication between Britain and China in the years running up to 1997. But while Patten was severely criticized by China, he remains a “hero of the people” to many Hong Kong citizens. This was evidenced by his recent return to Hong Kong in 2006, which generated an immediate sensation. See “The British Factor Won’t Go Away,” South China Morning Post, July 26, 2006, p.10.


28. It can be argued that, as a non-Chinese “expat” who has never lived in these estates himself, Sinclair’s praise for the solidarity of the working class could be a romanticized vision stemming from a somewhat abstracted empathy for the poor. His lamentation of the loss of warmth and affection in those who possess wealth and status, including many nouveau riche who once lived in public housing, and his constant effort to fight for the preservation of ordinary dwellings, however, also evidence his desire to affirm his identity as a legitimate local Hong Kong citizen-activist committed to speaking out on behalf of the populous against the ruling class.

29. The TV series “Below the Lion Rock,” which ran from 1974–1994, was produced by Radio and Television Hong Kong (RTHK).

30. Despite being criticized by some politicians for lacking new initiatives, public opinion polls showed that Leung’s speech was generally well received. This indeed was an unexpected outcome in the midst of a recession coupled with increasing distrust of the SAR government. Many people, especially the older generations who remembered “Below The Lion Rock” well, admitted that they found strong resonance with the sentiments of the song lyrics. The series was repeated shortly afterwards on the ATV home channel. In 2005, a new season consisting of ten episodes started to air on TVB Jade — the prime Cantonese TV channel in Hong Kong.


32. Hong Kong has long explicitly endorsed a policy of free markets and government “positive nonintervention” that arguably echoes with neoliberalism. The term neoliberalism is used here in correspondence with David Harvey’s definition, which defines it as “a theory of economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” See D. Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.2. On the other hand, Hong Kong’s international reputation as a bastion of “economic freedom” is somewhat paradoxical given that it has one of the largest government welfare programs in the world, particularly in relation to the provision of housing. See, for example, Castells et al., The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome.

33. At the time of writing, some of the tenants have already begun to move out. Those who could afford higher rent typically have chosen to relocate to the newer estates nearby. But a significant portion of the single elderly tenants who lived mostly on welfare could not do so.

34. The exhibition is accompanied by a photography competition, whose aim was to “capture the memory of life at Shekkipmei.”

35. On a number of websites featuring Shekkipmei, contributors offered various tips on how to lure the old tenants to agree to have their pictures taken, such as making claims that they were students working on a project, or that they were revisiting their childhood homes (which was true in some cases).

36. Photographs of the re-created interiors can be seen on the official exhibition website: http://www.naac.org.hk/skm/index.htm/37. Note that this term, which has been commonly circulated in everyday conversation and the popular media, was also employed in the official exhibition itself to describe the current state of Shekkipmei and other old housing estates.

38. For a detailed analysis of how a laissez-faire ideology came to be built upon the largest public housing program in the world, see Castells’s landmark study on the public housing programs of Hong Kong and Singapore (Castells et al., The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome).

39. An example relates to medical services. Although Hong Kong has a free universal health care system (aside from small user fees), not all services and drug provision are covered, which can lead to difficulty for impoverished groups.

40. Existing tenants were given the choice of moving to other estates, but the majority of these options involved significant increases in rent. Referring to the comment by a social worker with the elderly in the Sau Mau Ping Estate, these early public housing estates are the last place she would choose to live, as nobody would give a damn about you. After all, Hong Kong has the highest suicide rate for elderly people in the world, some of whom kill themselves by jumping out of the windows of these housing estates.

41. To avoid being looked down on by others, a thirteen-year-old resident of the Sau Mau Ping Estate was warned by his mother not to admit where he is from and to give only a general district address. See “The Estate Time Forgot,” Postmagazine, March 26, 2000, p.17.

42. Although it has been emphasized that the exhibition was organized with the help of the existing residents, many elderly tenants indicated that they were not aware of the event.

43. Although the image of the ideal citizen has retained a degree of continuity over time, it should be noted that toward the mid-1970s, as immigration control began to restrict the influx of mainland refugees, official narratives shifted to depict the mainland Chinese in increasingly derogative terms, often emphasizing the differences between urbane Hong Kong citizens and the backward Mainlanders and unsophisticated “new immigrants.” Discrimination against the latter was also manifested in government policies, as new regulations were put in place to restrict welfare benefits including public housing to permanent citizens. Indeed, he right to reside in (or apply for) a unit in the housing estates were granted to all immigrants of Chinese origin who entered Hong Kong’s territory before 1971, but was denied to those arriving afterwards, resulting in a significant shift in the discourse about who counted as a “Hong Kong person.” For an account of the shift in housing policies, see A. Smart, “Sharp Edges, Fuzzy Categories, and Transborder Networks: Managing and Housing New Arrivals in Hong Kong,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 26 (2003), pp.218–23.