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Wang Chau Village: (Non-)Indigenous Wisdom, Amidst Eviction





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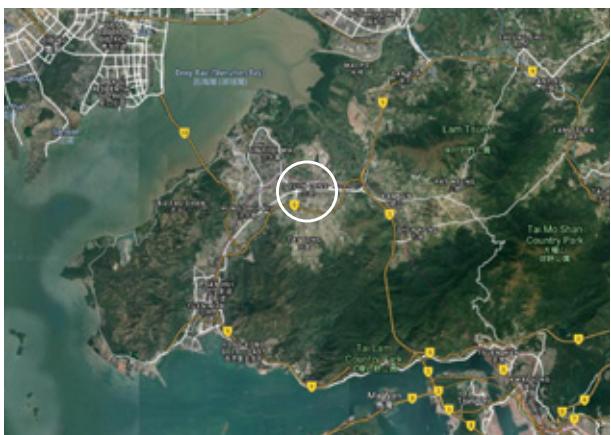
Cover: Gate locked by the Lands Department with eviction notices, Yeung Uk San Village, Wang Chau, 29 July 2020.

Inside cover: Mrs. Cheng's garden, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 15 July 2020.
Centrefold: Ms. Wong's home, converted chickenshed and garden, Yeung Uk San Village, 30 October 2020.

Photographs and film stills by Michael Leung, unless stated otherwise

insurrectionaryam.tumblr.com
www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-18

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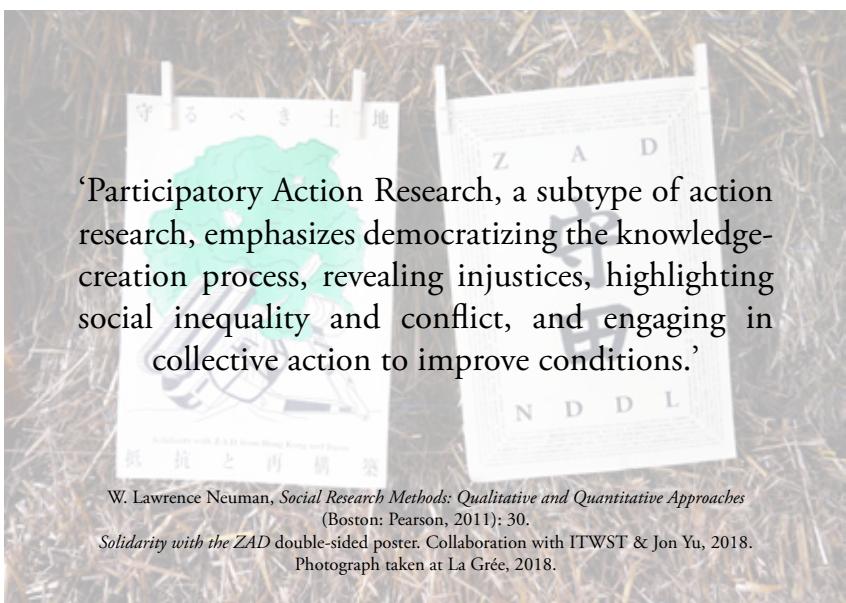
This text was written after an eviction deadline imposed on Wang Chau villagers on 15 July 2020, then extended to 29 July 2020, and currently in parallel to government eviction actions. An unpredictable situation, with frequent and unannounced visits since 15 July by the Lands Department (a government department under the Development Bureau) creates uncertainty for the green belt village, disrupts farming practices, displaces the community and shifts my ethnography towards the jackfruit, Chinese medicinal herbs and a villager ethnography—making it increasingly ‘patchy,’ to borrow from *Patchy Anthropocene [...]* by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Andrew S. Mathews and Nils Bubandt, who write about *‘attention to specific landscape histories’ and the ‘uneven conditions of more-than-human livability in landscapes under domination.’* Furthermore, the third wave of the pandemic and the ongoing social movement continues in Hong Kong, the latter now one year and three months long.

I write this text from home whilst following Telegram updates in the village patrol group. “地政剛落地” (“The Lands Department just arrived,” received at 10:09am, 10 September 2020). If required it would take me 45 minutes to reach the village entrance.

I am in the second year of a PhD relating to art, farming and activism, with teaching assistant duties and supported by a monthly studentship. I teach socially engaged art for one semester per year at Hong Kong Baptist University, and also take part in independent art and design projects throughout the year.

www.researchgate.net/publication/333763656_Patchy_Anthropocene_Landscape_Structure_Multispecies_History_and_the_Retooling_of_Anthropology_An_Introduction_to_Supplement_20

W. Lawrence Neuman,
Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches (Boston: Pearson, 2011): 30.



Barricade at the entrance of the *Vraie Rouge*, April 2018. Photograph by Penelope Thomaidi.
ZAD solidarity poster, *Ambazada*, Notre-Dame-des-Landes, July 2018.

I conduct a participatory action research methodology that aims in [...] democratizing the knowledge-creation process, revealing injustices, highlighting social inequality and conflict, and engaging in collective action to improve conditions.' This research methodology and the many ways it is practiced, collated and responsibly shared—for example, building commons, compiling field notes and distributing zines, respectively—allows the artist-researcher to respond to art critic and historian Hal Foster's ongoing question, '*The Artist as Ethnographer?*' which highlights the risk of quasi-anthropological art shows becoming spectacles 'where cultural capital collects'—accumulating the exploited and marginalised. To summarise, my free and creative participation at Wang Chau Village aims to support and communicate the villagers' plight and protect the green belt and all its inhabitants—from the tall-growing bitter leaf to the solitary firefly seen a couple of weeks ago.

The text is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the landscape's history and the second is more anecdotal and illustrative of a villager ethnography—learning through their daily life—towards a pedagogy of the movement.

https://monoskop.org/images/8/87/Foster_Hal_1995_The_Artist_as_Ethnographer.pdf



Wang Chau villagers, Wang Chau Green Belt Concern Group members and activists with Carrie Lam, 15 February 2017.
Drone view, Yeung Uk San Village, Wang Chau, 30 December 2017.
Photograph by Wang Chau Green Belt Concern Group.

Landscape History

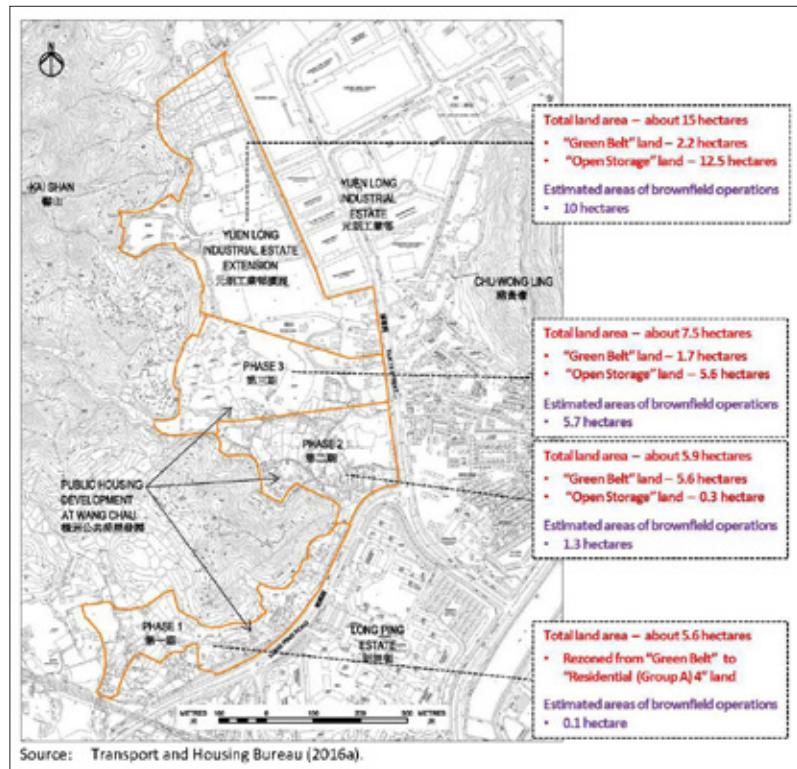
One ongoing land struggle in the New Territories led me to another, at an impromptu meeting in a 78-storey skyscraper in a commercial district on Hong Kong Island. At this meeting I met some villagers who had been resisting a government development plan since October 2015 that plans to evict three villages in Wang Chau: Wing Ning Village (永寧村), Fung Chi Village (鳳池村) and Yeung Uk San Village (楊屋新村)—hereon referred to as Wang Chau.

Later I learnt from the villagers that the public/social housing development project could be succinctly summarised with four Chinese characters, 官商鄉黑 (*gun1 soeng1 hoeng1 bak1*), meaning “government-businesses-rural leaders-triads collaborate together.” It is worth mentioning that the “Wang Chau Public Housing Development,” as referred to by the government, significantly differs to past farmland struggles such as Choi Yuen Village in 2009-2010 (whose outcome was a village relocation/reconstruction) and the north east New Territories “New Development Areas” (where Henderson Land Development Company Limited was granted in-situ land exchanges by the government that turn agricultural land into residential land).

www.wildheartrose.com/post/whats-the-fuss-about-the-nent-development-plan

www.arch.hku.hk/research_project/participatory-strategies-the-reconstruction-of-choi-yuen-village

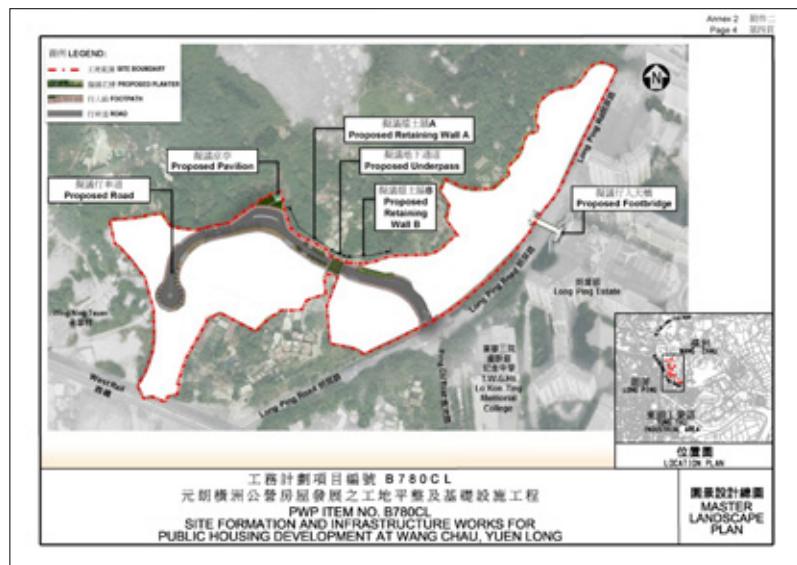
<https://hongkongfp.com/2016/06/14/last-two-protesters-leave-farmland-to-be-repossessed-by-development-company/>, www.tinyurl.com/HLDCL2016 to www.tinyurl.com/HLDCL2017 and <https://kttnfln-ndas.gov.hk/en/1-1-1-newsupdate.php>



Wang Chau exists on a sloped hill that is government-designated green belt land. Under former British colonial rule, 13% of Hong Kong's land was zoned as green belt; however a study entitled *Green belt in a compact city: A zone for conservation or transition?* concludes that:

[...] the planning authority [Town Planning Board] was readily receptive to many popular land-use development[s], such as 'small house', 'house' and 'open storage' uses. These were common land-use conversions favored by the rural population to get benefits from land within the green belt. Furthermore, although the planning authority tended to reject large-scale housing development, it was found to be quite prepared to release development rights of the green belt when it occupied a part of the proposed development located within other development zonings.'

Bo-Sin Tang, Siu Wai Wong and Anton King-wah Lee, *Green belt in a compact city: A zone for conservation or transition?*
www.researchgate.net/publication/222518733_Green_belt_in_a_compact_city_A_zone_for_conservation_or_transition



The aforementioned paper does not recognise and problematise the colonial classification of “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” villagers in the New Territories—indigenous being descendants of inhabitants before 1898, and non-indigenous being those who moved into the New Territories after 1898.

www.hongkongfp.com/2018/01/13/two-systems-one-colony-small-house-policy-reminder-duality-hong-kongs-past



Indigenous villager Small House nearing completion, Wang Chau, 2 April 2019. Photograph by Ms. Cheng.

The indigenous villagers were granted land rights by the British colonial government following a six-day imperial war in 1899. However the hegemonic and patriarchal land policies that favour indigenous villagers in the New Territories are a colonial residue that continue to discriminate indigenous women, dispossess non-indigenous villagers whilst privileging males in indigenous families with land and building rights, known as the Small House Policy—introduced in 1972. Contrary to Indigenous peoples such as those who fought the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 and inhabitants in the Amazon, Hong Kong indigenous villagers have a different approach to land conservation. A study by a non-profit independent research group called Liber Research Community shows that Hong Kong indigenous villagers often profit from their land rights by illegally contaminating farmland into brownfield—concretising fertile soil to make way for car parks, waste recycling yards and container storage.



Mr. Chan's home and farm (top right), Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 30 December 2017.

Photograph by Wang Chau Green Belt Concern Group.

Mr. Chan's farm, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 10 July 2020.

'The Wang Chau development plan and the government's mishandling of the situation reveals how weak this government actually is.'

— Mr. Chan, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau

East of Wang Chau is Long Ping Estate, a 15-block public housing estate built in 1986 on former agricultural land and fishponds. Formerly-displaced-once by Long Ping Estate Mr. Chan now resides in Wang Chau, often participating in press conferences, and also sharing his viewpoints on the development with students and journalists, often for hours. At the back of his home (which he owns, both house and land), Mr. Chan grows food on a 7000 square feet (650 square metres) plot of land that he previously rented from a land owner. The land owner sold the land to the government at a below market price, and since 15 July 2020 Mr. Chan's farm could be closed off by the Lands Department with little or no notice. Mr. Chan also works another plot of land which uses the yellow helmet, made popular during the Umbrella Movement and the ongoing social movement, as a scarecrow.

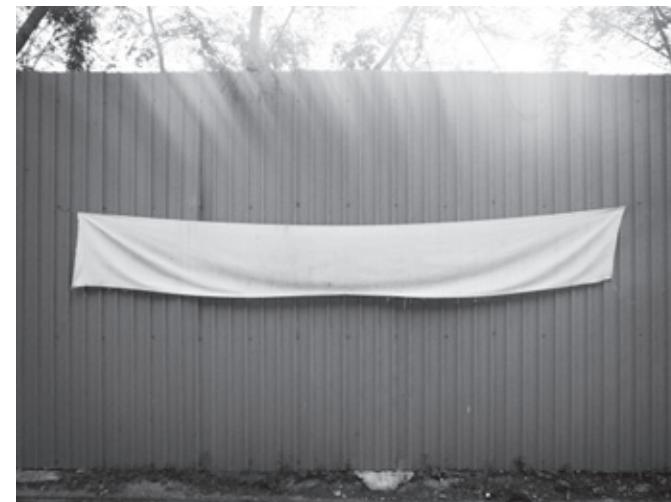
Conversation with
Mr. Chan on 30th July
2020.



New World Development Company Limited map by HK01 media, 29 September 2016.
Obtained from: www.tinyurl.com/wangchaurup English translation by Michael Leung.

The above map illustrates the government-developer malpractice in the west part of Wang Chau (Wing Ning Village). It was discovered by Apple Daily journalists on 28 September 2016 that Arup, an engineering consulting firm, was using government confidential information for a New World Development Company Limited (NWD) application to the government's Town Planning Board (TPB) to build luxury apartment blocks.

www.hongkongfp.com/2016/09/28/consulting-firm-arup-used-confidential-govt-data-developers-wang-chau-bid-report



Land acquired by New World Development Company Limited and a weathered banner testament to a two-year and ongoing resistance, in Wing Ning Village, Wang Chau, 3 May 2017.



Brownfield operations viewed from Kai Shan, Wang Chau, 27 June 2017.
Farmer burning farm waste, Phase 2, Wang Chau, 30 July 2020.

In other words, Arup consulted for both the government and property developer by sharing traffic, drainage and sewage data to the benefit of the developer's application. Furthermore, according to the map, proposed parts of New World's private housing seem to exist on government land. In November 2016 NWD made another application to the TPB to commercialise the illustrated land into a '*Temporary Driving School for a Period of 3 Years.*'

North of the development area is a trail that takes you up Kai Shan, a scenic mountain topped with a small Buddhist temple and self-built seating that overlooks: Phase 1 which is Wang Chau; Phase 2 which is also sloped green belt land with village houses and small farms and apiaries; and Phase 3 composed of brownfield active as car parks, waste recycling yards and container storage.

[www.info.gov.hk/tpb/
en/meetings/RNTPC/
Minutes/m569rnt_e.
pdf](http://www.info.gov.hk/tpb/en/meetings/RNTPC/Minutes/m569rnt_e.pdf)



徵收棕地滅找生計 (Seizing brownfield, Ends livelihoods), Phase 2, Wang Chau,
shared 21 August 2020. Photograph by Sallie.

The government's decision to not develop the flat Wang Chau brownfield first is a debate that epitomises the government-businesses-rural leaders-triads collusion and highlights the bargaining power of rural leaders and indigenous villagers. In Wang Chau, indigenous villagers have profited by selling their land and buildings to property developers and non-indigenous villagers (in some cases several decades ago). Meanwhile lucrative and illegal brownfield activities in Phase 3, allegedly supported by triad gangs, such as car parking and container storage, are spared from government development, to an unscheduled later date.

www.tinyurl.com/phase3brownfield and
www.tinyurl.com/gunsoenghoenghak

Last week with Sallie, a friend, I visited the nearby brownfield for the first time to learn about a place often scorned by villagers, the concern group, researchers and media—and myself! Having looked down onto the brownfield from the peak of Kai Shan for three years, an objective perspective was timely after Sallie shared a photograph of a banner that expressed support for the recycling centres located on brownfield.



Mr. Au cutting sugarcane, Phase 2, Wang Chau, 25 August 2020. Film still.
Mr. Ma showing us his hornet wine, Phase 2, Wang Chau, 25 August 2020.

In Phase 2 Sallie and I met a non-indigenous farmer called Mr. Au who farms on a roughly 1500 square feet (140 square metres) land and collects water from a nearby communal village well. Mr. Au knows that he may lose the farm in the near future, but he continues, travelling an hour from his home to reach this well used patch of land.

En route to seeing the village well we met gardener and beekeeper Mr. Ma, who has a dense garden of fruit trees, medicinal herbs and 20 beehives. He only harvests honey in the springtime, which could be seen as being slightly less exploitative than other local beekeepers. Mr. Ma was enthusiastic to share his beekeeping practice and took time to give me advice on my urban beehive, as I only keep bees to support biodiversity and pollination, and not for honey production.





Metal recycling centre with two excavators, Phase 3, Wang Chau, 25 August 2020. Film still.
Recycled metal and Tesla car, Phase 3, Wang Chau, 25 August 2020.

The Phase 3 brownfield, that used to be arable land, proved to be more disturbing up close than viewed from the top of Kai Shan. The land is populated with metal recycling centres, taxi repair shops, multi-vehicle parking, e-waste centres, stacked containers, torn bags of plastic pellets and private cars suggestive of how lucrative brownfield business can be.

The largest area of brownfield in Phase 3 is accessible on Fung Hi Street. The busy multi-vehicle traffic is informative of the activities happening inside. After passing the unused security barrier gate, a destroyed red taxi is parked on the left and opposite stands a Government Land sign, spray painted in red, hiding its no trespassing, dumping or unlawful occupation message. Other government signs are blocked from view or overgrown with plants.

Further in the brownfield is a flattened and damaged land, roughly two hectares in size, that serves as an unmanaged multi-vehicle car park. When attempting to walk to the far side, Sallie and I caught the attention of two dogs who slowly approached us whilst barking. Soon after, the two barks turned into a hostile chorus of 10 that surrounded us, and we decided to leave carefully via the route we came.

With this first visit to the brownfield we saw the illegal businesses operating in Phase 3 that complicate its development into social housing. To the visitor, the brownfield is open, invisibly and allegedly run by rural leaders and uncontrolled by the government—unlike in Wang Chau Village. In the past year triad attacks and pro-

[www.tinyurl.com/
fukhighstreet](http://www.tinyurl.com/fukhighstreet)

N.B. <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/07/27/explainer-yuen-long-mob-attacks-hong-kongs-triads-consider-new-territories-lawless>



establishment and pro-Chinese Communist Party actions have further problematised the New Territories. Selina Ching Chan offers a postcolonial perspective in 1998, one year after the handover, in *Politicizing Tradition: The Identity of Indigenous Inhabitants in Hong Kong*:

During this period [the 99-year colonial lease], there has been a shift of emphasis in the meaning of the identity of indigenous inhabitants (yuanjumin) from that of an ethnic group peripheral to colonial culture to that of Chinese with China and being in the mainstream of Chinese culture.

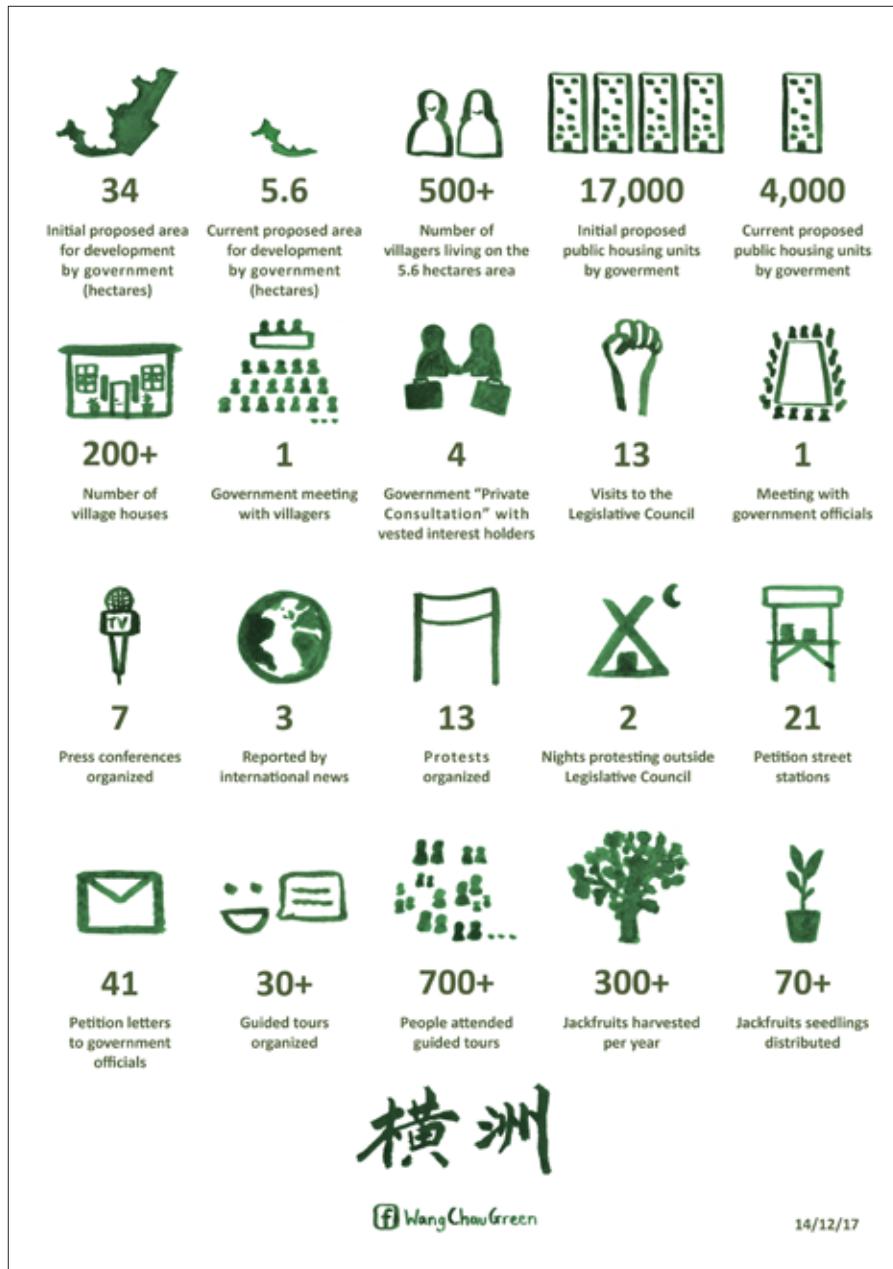
In anticipation of my second brownfield visit, I question: Did land restrictions enforced by the British colonial government and the 99-year lease of the New Territories accelerate a capitalist logic amongst indigenous villagers, that has resulted in the situation in Phase 3 where natural resources have been unlawfully commodified into brownfield?

Selina Ching Chan, *In Politicizing Tradition: The Identity of Indigenous Inhabitants in Hong Kong*, Ethnology, Winter, 1998, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Winter, 1998) p.39-40.



Indigenous villager burial sites, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 30 December 2017.
Photograph by Wang Chau Green Belt Concern Group.

Unused security barrier gate, Phase 3, Wang Chau, 25 August 2020.



Focusing on Wang Chau, it is evident that the New Territories is rife with colonial entanglements, reinforced by past and present undemocratic governments, that privilege and dispossess different villagers, businesses and biodiversity—leaving no green belt and agricultural land safe from development—except the burial sites of indigenous villagers, some of which are bigger than apartments for the living.

To help communicate a complex socio-political situation, with the Wang Chau Green Belt Concern Group's data, I produced a poster in English and Chinese, which has been shared on the concern group's Facebook page, in printed matter and at village events. The poster was made following the inaugural 2017 Wang Chau Jackfruit Festival, a public event that celebrates a tropical fruit grown by many villagers.

Villager Ethnography

The 2017 Wang Chau Jackfruit Festival was expected to be the first and last, but owing to a continued resistance that includes rejection of an inequitable compensation, non-cooperation with the Lands Department and demands to stay, this summer saw the fourth jackfruit festival happen, that responsibly welcomed a large audience during the pandemic—perhaps 500 people. Through co-organising the jackfruit festivals with the villagers and concern group, I got to know the village in more detail, and later gave tours to a group of hikers and an *Art and Ecology* class from my university. I remember being overwhelmed by the five-year history of the resistance and if my translation done justice to the villagers' stories.

The next part of the text shares some exchanges that I have had with the villagers, in a more anecdotal form. As predicted by sociology professor Siu Keung Cheung, postcolonial Hong Kong continues to surprise, especially in the past year.

The postcolonial situation of Hong Kong will be equally full of remarkable life stories and people's numerous interplays with different hegemonic forces at different levels.

Estimated guess by the organisers.



2020 Wang Chau Jackfruit Festival at the Au Yeung family home, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 11 July 2020. Photograph by Kevin Cheng. www.tinyurl.com/jackfruitfest2020photos

Siu Keung Cheung,
*Gender and
Community Under
British Colonialism:
Emotion, Struggle and
Politics in a Chinese
Village* (Routledge,
2006): 150.



Harvesting jackfruit with Mrs. and Mr. Cheng's net technique. The net has two bamboo poles on opposing sides and the jackfruit is brought down using self-modified extendable shears, equipped with a wood saw.

Harvesting jackfruit with Mrs. and Mr. Cheng, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 1 August 2018.



In March 2019 my supervisor, Dr. Zheng Bo, asked me to give a tour of Wang Chau to his BA (Hons) *Art and Ecology* course students. The English tour was also attended by 丁卓藍 an alumni and traditional Chinese medicine practitioner, researchers and activists, and a member of the concern group. Mrs. Cheng gave a detailed tour of her garden and kindly shared some produce and plants with visitors, some of which made sketches of the plants.

丁卓藍 and Mrs. Cheng, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 9 March 2019.



A friend, Joshua Wolper, also known as The Clumsy Gardener on YouTube (www.youtube.com/c/TheClumsyGardener/videos), made large quantities of jackfruit mead for each of the four jackfruit festivals (2017 to 2020).

Mrs. Cheung and Joshua Wolper making jackfruit mead, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 5 July 2020.



Due to villager demand, Joshua revisited Wang Chau in July 2020 to make jackfruit mead at the Cheung family's home with villagers, their relatives, members of the concern group and supporters. This year Joshua has made four videos in Wang Chau with Mrs. Cheung and Ms. Cheng.

Mrs. Cheung's new batch of jackfruit mead, Fung Chi Village, Wang Chau, 5 July 2020.



《橫洲草藥圖鑑》*Wang Chau Chinese Medicinal Herbs* zine
made with Ms. Cheng, the concern group and others.

《橫洲草藥圖鑑》*Wang Chau Chinese Medicinal Herbs* zine photograph taken on top of Kai Shan, Wang Chau, 17 March 2020. Photograph by Wang Chau Green Belt Concern Group.



Ms. Cheng sharing the stages of her home—
wooden hut (1960s) to a concrete house (present day).

Wing Ning Village, Wang Chau, 7 August 2020. Film still.



Mr. Lam's traditional bone-setter sign at the former entrance of his home.

Yeung UK San Village, Wang Chau, 31 July 2020.



Mr. Lam turning the bone-setter illuminated sign on and off for the last time at the front entrance of his home.

Yeung UK San Village, Wang Chau, 17 October 2020.



Ah Hon's modified electric bicycle.

Wing Ning Village, Wang Chau, 22 September 2020.



Ah Hon attaching a trailer to the back of his electric bicycle.

Wing Ning Village, Wang Chau, 22 September 2020.



Ms. Wong runs a traditional Chinese medicine clinic from two storage containers. Mr. Lam said that in the 1980s the bottom container was a karaoke booth and the top container was an arcade games centre (accessible via a back staircase).

Ms. Wong's traditional Chinese medicine clinic and gardens, Yeung Uk San Village, 29 July 2020.

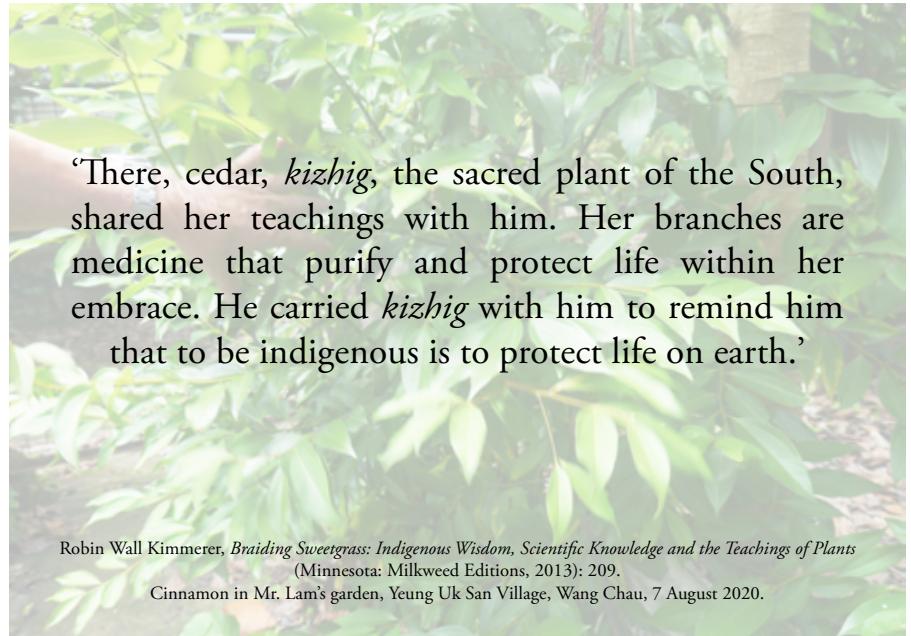


Ms. Wong harvesting edible Chinese violet flowers (夜來香) in her front garden.

Yeung Uk San Village, 31 July 2020. Film still.

The aforementioned non-indigenous villagers and their daily practices are part of Wang Chau's collective wisdom that is connected to the village's natural resources and shared openly to those who visit—from Mrs. Cheng sharing plants and produce at the public jackfruit festivals to a chance stroll past a beekeeper and his garden. An inequitable village eviction uproots these practices and displaces people and many species such as bats, moths, turtles and fruit trees. As an artist-researcher now observing evicted and blocked village homes, what other possibilities might there be in supporting the villagers still living in the remaining 52 homes?

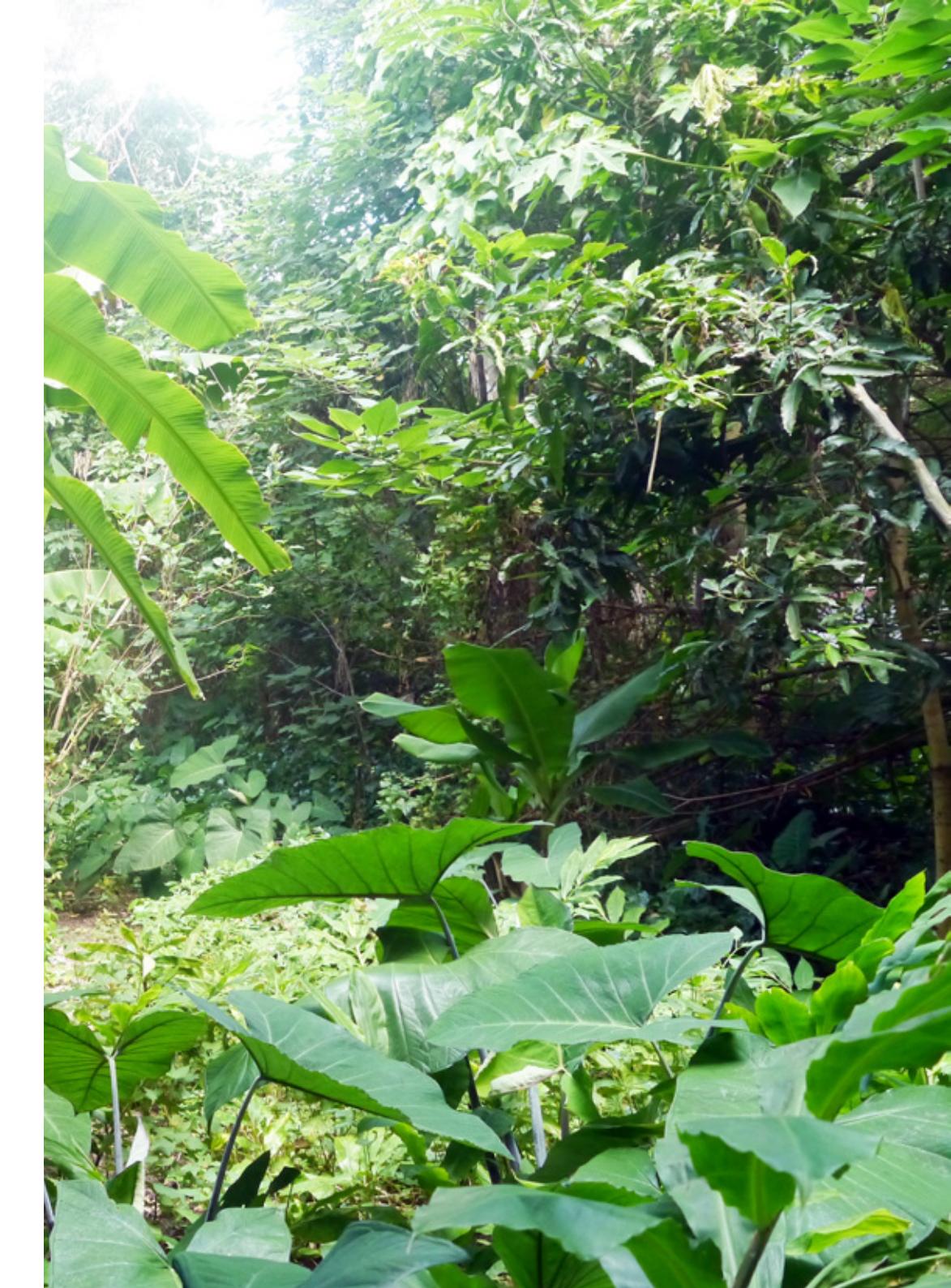
Reflecting on the dichotomy of indigenous and non-indigenous villagers that have led to the latter's dispossession, I would like to end with a quote about the cedar tree from mother, plant ecologist and professor Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, entitled *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*:



'There, cedar, *kizhig*, the sacred plant of the South, shared her teachings with him. Her branches are medicine that purify and protect life within her embrace. He carried *kizhig* with him to remind him that to be indigenous is to protect life on earth.'

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*
(Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013): 209.

Cinnamon in Mr. Lam's garden, Yeung Uk San Village, Wang Chau, 7 August 2020.



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