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*International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2010 13: 616

DOI: 10.1177/1367877910376580

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Volume 13(6): 616–636  
DOI: 10.1177/1367877910376580



## Tai O village Vernacular fisheries management or revitalization?

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**ABSTRACT** ● This article offers a socio-cultural perspective on what happens to a once thriving fishing village when the traditional fishermen retire, their children seek safer and more lucrative work in an adjacent cosmopolitan city, and the population diminishes leaving the village facing economic hardship and general decline. The article explores these issues and the related aspects of 'place' and 'space' in the context of Tai O village, Lantau Island, Hong Kong. The article treats 'space' as a blend of social experience and physical structure in order to examine the tensions between the vernacular architecture of Tai O and the Hong Kong government's plans to 'revitalize' the area. ●

**KEYWORDS** ● fisher people ● Hong Kong ● *Pang O* ● revitalization  
● Tai O ● vernacular architecture

Fall tangerines' flower pot fills with branches;  
Fall night rain is the perfect time [for love].  
Fall colours each year come but once;  
Fall wind blows slightly, stirring [women's] clothes.  
In fall, near the garden wall, he listened, so they say:  
'Fall Fragrance' bought and sold himself, as the poem tells.  
Fall moon rays are bright, but rain can come.

In fall, though you hate the traveller's way, you can still meet old friends.  
 In fall she walks smiling, her thoughts secret and shy –  
 The fall chrysanthemum has no thorns.  
 (A traditional Tai O song, cited in Anderson, 1967: 294)

It is now well-established that the relationality and complexity of physical place cannot be dissociated from human space, that is, the personal and social experience of individuals and communities. Space is an instrument of power and therefore a site of struggle (Barnett, 1999; Harvey, 1996; Lehtovuori, 2005), a struggle which is reflected in the tensions between the modern and the traditional (Chong, 2007; Ku, 2001). Previous research has highlighted the importance of the physicality of space, the primacy of its structural and material features, and the many layers of human experience that contribute to make a space a place: sensory perception, memories, feelings, human agency, social connections and cultural traditions (Giddens, 1981, 1984; Tuan, 1977).

This article, which in the main explores aspects of decline and revitalization, questions what happens to a once-thriving fishing village when the traditional fishermen retire, their children seek to earn a living in an adjacent cosmopolitan city, and the population dwindles leaving the village facing economic hardship and general decline. The article explores these issues and related aspects of 'place' and 'space' in the context of Tai O village, Hong Kong. Tai O, one of Hong Kong's oldest traditional fishing villages, known for its *Pang O* (stilt houses) and fishing history (Ho, 2006), currently faces dilapidation as a result of a governmental development strategy that may adversely affect its traditional architectural and social ambience. This is a particularly important topic in light of how the Hong Kong government may view the maritime village of Tai O vis-a-vis transforming (officially called 'revitalizing') it into a popular and lucrative tourist attraction (Chow, 1997). In its exploration of the tensions that persist between modernization and tradition in Tai O, the article examines aspects of the built environment and vernacular architecture,<sup>1</sup> and in this pursuit treats space not as a 'mere shell' or location (geometric space), but rather as a blend of experience and physical structure.

The article is structured as follows: the next section offers a brief background of the study and an historical overview of Tai O village and its people. This is followed by an illustration of the key elements of the Tai O space, including local architecture and fishing techniques. The final section highlights the tensions between preservation and revitalization facing the village today.

## Background of the study

The importance of resource development in indigenous lands – a contentious issue – is often seen as a form of commodification in a Western economic context (Wooten, 1995). Faced with culturally specific norms and traditions,

governments and resource developers frequently find indigenous societies bewilderingly complex, incapable of attracting capital investment (Hunt, 1993). This is particularly true in the case of Tai O, where traditional fisheries management and modern revitalization seem to confront each other, suggesting that the traditional is fast losing out to a global onslaught of modernization. In its bid to revitalize Lantau Island and make it an attractive tourist venue the Hong Kong government has proposed the creation of a theme fountain, sculptures, stone carvings, a shorefront wooden walkway, a public transit area, tourist accommodation, a Chinese-style park, a water-lily pond, a shorefront plaza, an ethnic museum constructed in stilt-house design and a helicopter landing pad (Wong, 2007).

According to the Hong Kong government's Planning Department (PD, 2000), 300,000 tourists visit Tai O annually, 90 percent of whom are Hong Kong residents. However, with the strengthening of ties between mainland China and Hong Kong, the revitalization programme has been designed to double the number of tourists, i.e. a target figure in excess of 600,000 visitors which may bring in more money but may well cause pollution and damage the village's cultural and natural heritage (Chan, 2003: 76).

Tai O village has a rich cultural heritage and natural resources that have been sustained by the villagers over many generations. Chan (2003: 3) notes that the survival of both cultural heritage and natural resources is integral to the survival of the Tai O identity. Notwithstanding, governmental attempts are focused upon meeting the needs of tourists rather than of Tai O residents. In its initial 2001 draft of the revitalization strategy, the government advocated the demolition of some of Tai O's unique stilt houses, which are a core element of the Tai O heritage and the village's major tourist attraction. The government proposed replacing them (a) with a new Malaysian-style stilt house water resort that would attract overnight tourism, and (b) with a miniature folk museum to be located in Ocean Park, patterned on Sung Dynasty lines (GTTP, 2004).

The local villagers reacted strongly to the government proposals and, following public consultation with the government, some amendments were made to alleviate their concerns. This study has a dual focus upon developing an understanding of the socio-cultural identity of Tai O and upon identifying the challenges that both Tai O village and its people face from revitalization. Main sources of data were discussions with locals, conservationists and academics, recourse to documents and personal observation. In 2004 and 2008, the first author (hereafter referred to as the FA) made two extended field trips to Hong Kong (followed by a shorter visit in 2009), researching particular aspects of Tai O village, including its history, physical place and human space, fishing and other economic activities, environment and socio-cultural traditions. In-depth research included examination of *Pang O* architecture, and observation of local traditions and lifestyles.

Apart from the discussions, during which the FA was aided by three translators (see acknowledgement), other sources of information were sought,

including newspaper reports, research documents, academic theses, local library resources, governmental archives, public fact-finding reports, Internet documents, and surveys published by various conservationists and organizations. The intertextuality of documents and personal histories allowed for corroboration of threads (or themes) across storied accounts from multiple sources.

## Historical and geographical context

The fishing village of Tai O, home to the Tan ka<sup>2</sup> (Tanka) people, is situated on the south-west coast of Lantau Island, on the mouth of the Pearl River. Tai O, which has remained relatively untouched by large-scale development, is now being revitalized by the Hong Kong government in the interests of development and attracting tourism.

The majority ethnic group, that is, the Tanka people, historically pearl divers in the Toho harbour, may have been descendants of the sea-faring Yueh tribes of South China (Anderson, 1969). The fisher people themselves are unsure of their ancestry. The term ‘Tanka’ literally means ‘egghead’ or ‘egg family’ people. The latter term has its origins in folk etymology, which suggests that in times past the Tanka used eggs rather than money to pay their taxes. However, the Tanka prefer to call themselves the *sui song ian* (or *seui seung yan*, ‘people of the water’ or ‘water folk’). They are distinguishable by their hats, which have a round brim and crown. According to Ward’s (1985a) study, the Tanka described themselves as Han people rather than as simply ‘water folk’. Ward states that the appellation ‘Tanka’ had connotations of derision and was resented by the Tanka people, who were ‘often referred to as exemplars of loose sexual morality and other un-Chinese characteristics’ (1985a: 27).

The Cantonese-speaking<sup>3</sup> Tanka, retiring by nature, have in the past had to live alongside ‘foreign elements’ (the Portuguese, for example, lived in Tai O in the 16th century). Their own verifiable and permanent settlement is known to date back 300 years. During and after the Chinese Civil War (April 1927–May 1950), Tai O became a primary entry point for illegal immigration for people escaping from the People’s Republic of China. Some, mostly Han Chinese, sought refuge in Tai O, which also attracted some Hokkien and Hakka. The former stayed on as farmers, the latter as salt-panners (now retired). Ward (1985a) noted in the 1930s that Tai O’s salt fields were owned by three major companies, who sub-let them to Lantau natives or contracted outside labourers from Haifeng to work them.

When the British government first established the colony of Hong Kong in 1841, it was mainly inhabited by ‘water people’ or ‘boat people’, who at the time were both economically and culturally important to Hong Kong. But, despite their significant role, the boat people felt marginalized, opting to live as a separate social group, having minimal contact with the shore dwellers. Lam (2002) claims that they were forbidden to attend school and



**Figure 1** Map of Hong Kong showing the location of Lantau Island and Tai O<sup>1</sup>  
 Source: <http://worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/lcolor/hkcolor.htm> (consulted February 2008).

<sup>1</sup>Copyright permission granted by John Moen of Graphic Maps and World Atlas.

to marry 'land' residents. A further alien influence – the Japanese – occupied Tai O village for three years and four months during the Second World War, from the time of Hong Kong's capitulation on 25 December 1941. But despite the above influences, the Tanka people steadfastly continued to preserve their traditions and culture.

In the early days, some Tai O residents (probably the sedentary Hakka) lived by growing crops and vegetables, pig farming, fishing and salt farming. Others worked as *toi shan dau* carriers, that is, transport by sedan chair, a task that involved mostly women. 'A *shan dau* was actually a rattan seat. Each side of [the seat] had three rattan circles ... A bamboo pole linked the circles on each side, creating a seat for passengers' (Wong, 2000: 89). (This arduous industry ceased in 1971 when the Tai O Road opened to vehicular

traffic from Mui Wo to Tai O.) While the women were engaged in *shan dau*, some of the men undertook labouring work, carrying heavy construction materials to building sites<sup>4</sup> and clearing vegetation. Some engaged in street vending, some in commerce, while others were employed overseas. Wong writes: 'In the 30s many ... were recruited to work on Nauru Island and Ocean Island in the Pacific when they were sub-colonized under the Australian government' (2000: 87).

The village was electrified in 1957 by private contract with the China Light and Power Co. Prior to electrification, householders and fisher people used kerosene lamps, both in their homes and on board. Sewerage – an ongoing problem – still drops straight from the *Pang O* into the Tai Chung stream, once a favourite swimming spot. In the past, particularly during the rainy season when the water from waterfalls flowed down from the mountains, villagers used to swim in the Tai Chung stream,<sup>5</sup> which naturally divides the village. But today it is polluted by sewage. In addition, the building of the Shek Pik reservoir<sup>6</sup> diverted the water flow from the village. Whereas in the past the water from the Tai Chung rose up to the stilt houses, nowadays the reservoir obstructs this flow. Children's playing activities are restricted: they can only play inside the stilt houses or in social spaces in the village. Playing out-of-doors in the immediate vicinity of the *Pang O* is dangerous, for these open areas are littered with diverse forms of 'modern' rubbish among which one can count soft drink cartons, plastic bags, soles of shoes, and take-away food cartons.

Among the village's social amenities is the local library, which the FA noted was modern, well-equipped and with never a chair unoccupied. Adjacent to the library is a care centre for the aged and handicapped. The fire station houses what may be the smallest fire-engines in the world today, built to navigate Tai O's narrow streets.<sup>7</sup> Tai O has a post office, a police station, a government clinic, and an old community hall. The maximum temperature is around 34 degrees, the lowest 9–10 degrees. There is no mosquito infestation.

Tai O's population dropped from 5168 in 1981 to 2223 in 1996.<sup>8</sup> While 2001 demographics suggested a slight improvement in the population, which is more than 3300, it is still much less than the 1981 demographics (Chan, 2003).

The following section deals primarily with the villagers of Tai O, fishing techniques, and mode of living.

## Key elements of Tai O space

### Stilt houses (*Pang O*)

According to Giddens (1984), space is an important element for social integration and 'face to face' relations between actors who are co-present in space. It is important for the routinized character of daily life and for the





**Figure 2** Tai O: an old fishing village with a long history

structure of the system. At the level of everyday life, or social integration, space is an element according to which the ‘paths’ or the routines of actors are formed and, in the level of the system or system integration, these ‘paths’ have to be overcome in order to bring actors closer together. Space thus is ‘not an empty dimension along which social groupings become structured, but has to be considered in terms of its involvement in the constitution of systems of interaction’ (Giddens, 1984: 368).

Tai O’s *Pang O*<sup>9</sup> represent an important element of village space. These houses, which have been in evidence for some 200 years, were first built in response to practical need. The physical fabric that sustains the collective memory of Tai O residents and contributes to their sense of cultural identity, *Pang O* represent the floating population of Tanka junk dwellers (either purse-seiners or small long-liners) moving ashore. These were a fishing people, who originally lived entirely on boats and only slowly took up part land-based residence. In the words of Wong:

The earlier stilt houses were nicknamed ‘water houses’ or ‘leaf houses’. The design was copied from a boat, the only difference being its immobility. The major building materials used in the construction of this vernacular type of dwelling include stone (supporting pillars), wooden planks, and leaves. The stone pillars were later replaced with black wooden stilts. There was no standard size. (2000: 139)

Prior to the 1950s, all *Pang O* were vault-shaped, following the lines of the sampan. The dwellings that Yeung refers to as Type 1 houses were covered



by palm leaves and pine tree bark, and tied together with fishing net. ‘Later on, palm leaf was replaced by fibre sheets’ (Yeung, 2003: 11). The structural ribs of the vault-shaped roof were made out of curved bamboo strips. ‘Six stone pillars were required for a 14-ft-long vault-shaped stilt house’ (2003: 3). The next stage, Type 2, saw the vaulted roof replaced by a:

simple truss system enclosed with wooden planks and galvanized sheet metal over the rafters. The stilt house now looked like a small hut with a pitch roof. Apart from the roof, other features of the houses remained similar to the previous style. (2003: 3)

Type 3 saw the introduction of the water resistant *Kwan Din* wood<sup>10</sup> pillars, which replaced the stone pillars. This period saw the emergence of the two-storeyed wooden houses, which have remained the most popular configuration today. ‘Government restricted the height limit to 12 ft so the mean height of every floor is about 6ft. The size varies from rectangular layout [15 ft × 10 ft] to square layout [12 ft × 12 ft]. [The] first floor is living space with [a] place for the ancestors’ altar. Sleeping space is at the back. [The] second floor is solely allocated for sleeping’ (Yeung, 2003: 3). In some houses the storage area is either at the back stage or on the second floor. Kitchens and toilets are separate structures located at the front stage, which is both communal and sacred space. It is in this front stage that family ceremonies and funerals are carried out.

The Type 4 stilt house, which includes those built after the 2000 fire, has the appearance of a single bulky structure. Following the fire, while the government allowed residents to rebuild in situ, the maximum size of each new house was restricted to the ‘footprint’ of the previous structure, the only concession being that the height limit was increased from 12 to 15 ft in the interests of fire rescue (Yeung, 2003: 4). However, residents were allowed to add on a balcony, accessible from the second floor.

Tai O’s residents have ‘invented’ many of the architectural features of their stilt houses, for example the ‘deck’ space, built as an extension to the interior space. The deck space is a ‘circulation’ space, which connects different stilt houses and provides access to the main streets. Thus private and public space is intricately overlapped. Privacy does not seem to be a major concern of the Tai O stilt house residents. Altman suggests that:

privacy is achieved more often through rules regulating behaviour rather than by direct manipulation of the environment. Although behaviours regulating access are found in every culture, the value of securing privacy by structuring the environment or social relations is not the same everywhere, nor have all societies managed to develop mechanisms for securing desired levels of privacy. (Altman, 1975: 8, cited in Lawrence and Low, 1990: 479)

Yan Mei-Yee (2001: 99) cites Yeoh and Kong (1995) as follows: ‘[S]tilt houses offer a “sense of human scale” and have a certain “physical connectedness” which encourages social interaction and fosters “a feeling of intimacy”.’ Turner suggests that:

by their positioning in space, or by their movements in space, people signal to others their intentions and expectations. Without this capacity to draw from stocks of knowledge and make for themselves a 'stage presence', interaction could be difficult since individuals could not use their respective positions and movements in space to tell others about their respective actions. (Giddens and Turner, 1987: 176)

Seen from this angle, Tai O's *Pang O* have a 'stage presence', an outcome of the deliberate positioning, intentions and expectations of the local fisher people.

Examination of one single-storey stilt house in 2004 revealed a floor area of approximately 20 ft × 20 ft, ceiling height 6–7 ft,<sup>11</sup> with wooden floor planks through which one could see the water. Half of this particular dwelling stood in the water, the other half – a recent addition made of galvanized tin – stood on the land. In the open kitchen area, plastic bags filled with household goods hung from wooden beams. The FA noted a stepladder, a bench with drawers, a sink for dish washing, a chopping instrument on a board, bottles of sauces, a strainer, bowls and a hotplate for cooking. Baskets hung from ceiling hooks: the FA noted another sink area for hand washing. There is always an area set aside for an altar at which villagers worship their ancestors and gods; as well, there is a 'cat' ladder, so called because one adopts a cat-like movement when climbing it. Occupants (stilt squatters)<sup>12</sup> pay only a 'licence' tax of approximately HK\$100 to the government per annum. Transfer of occupancy is limited to immediate family members only.

Many pairs of shoes were lined up at the entrance. The FA noted furled green blinds on either side of the deck, clearly a form of protection from the weather but obviously rarely used. Rows of *ham yu* (fish), to which salt had been added, hung from twine, drying in the sun. Local families buy these (they call them *ba wa*) from the local markets, salt them and dry them in the sun, then sell them for a small profit. The fish roe, which was also drying in the sun, is stored in jars as it is considered health-giving. Fish products sold in Tai O today include salted fish, salted shrimps, salted squid, shrimp cakes and shrimp paste. As well, duck egg yolks and vegetables are salted and preserved.

One stilt house visit revealed three elderly ladies playing a card game named *Tung Kun*, which has its origins in Guandong Province. On this occasion, the FA noted that several stilt houses were joined together, with stone columns, hung with (in this case) taps, hoses, two dinghies and wicker baskets, effecting the joins. The FA, after proceeding two-thirds of the way through the house(s), was somewhat startled to see an open fire area, i.e. three stoves, each with a huge pot on top, firewood stacked neatly alongside. The FA considered the degree to which stilt house dwellers must respect the use of fire when one reflects upon the flimsy nature of these constructions and recalls the devastating fires of 2000. Each house in this continuous structural cluster had a refrigerator and a TV set. A heavy wire mesh floor area had been added, approximately 40 ft long and 15 ft wide. Two elderly sisters were present on this occasion. One lives in the Lung Tin public housing estate built

by the Hong Kong government on reclaimed marine mud; the other, who was aged 70, had lived in stilt houses all of her life. As a young woman, she accompanied her husband on fishing trips but seasickness forced her ashore. There she continued to work hard, salting fish and pulling the rope ferry<sup>13</sup> across the stream.<sup>14</sup> This was the only means of crossing prior to the bridge being built. Today, due to government excavation at the mouth of the river, there is some fear that the seabed will weaken and that the sea level will drop as a result. This particular group of 'cluster' dwellers fear that if the seawater no longer reaches the stilts, the foundations may dry and weaken. To combat this threat, the Hong Kong government ferried in six massive stone blocks by boat and laid them in front of their joint *Pang O*. At times of festivals, the sisters explained, many family members tend to gather together in the houses and they are fearful that the balcony could collapse.

Further observation in the village revealed groups of people playing Mah Jong, often in the back rooms of grocer shops, which serve as general meeting places. Social links such as these provide psychological support, giving rise to an enhanced sense of security and to an openness and cohesion rarely seen in urban locales.

In July 2000, a fire that burned for six hours devastated Tai O. Approximately 90 *Pang O* were destroyed, leaving about 300 people homeless. Anger erupted over the Fire Department's perceived tardy response. It was believed that many houses could have been saved from burning had firemen responded more quickly. Problems arose regarding occupancy rights because the stilt houses are considered by the government to be squatter settlements on government land. The government largely ignored and/or delayed the residents' resettlement plans, causing major concern to the village people, who wanted to rebuild the stilt houses in situ. This would have alleviated any need to move elsewhere (Chan, 2003: 93).

Given the complex relations between culture, power and the different spatialities of social practices (Barnett, 1999), it comes as no surprise that there are numerous misgivings about governmental intentions and projects. For instance, a conspiracy theory suggested that the fire may have been a way of clearing the area for 'revitalization'. After the fire, issues surrounding this fishing community came to the fore again. The government did not want the occupants (whom it considers 'squatters') to redevelop the area but the locals fought this proposition vigorously. A group of young residents' family members, out of their love for Tai O and its culture and traditions, tried to raise funds for rebuilding. Finally the government granted the locals the right to rebuild but the latter have had little success raising money. When jobs became hard to find in Hong Kong around that time, many unemployed returned to Tai O to help reconstruct the new houses. But so far only 14 have been rebuilt as the villagers have had to find the money themselves. The Hong Kong government is not subsidizing the rebuilding. As of 2009, no further permits for private building are being issued.

Chan (2003: 94) identifies some positive elements from the above episode. When the preservation of Tai O's history and lifestyle drew the attention of

the Hong Kong population as a whole, the government reconsidered its revitalization strategy and placed more value on the stilt houses as part of Tai O's cultural heritage.

The government attempted to move the *Pang O* dwellers into the high-rise Lung Tin housing estate. But many villagers did not welcome this proposal because (a) they would have to pay rent; (b) the rooms are small; and (c) they would have to live vertically. An article that appeared in the *South China Morning Post* in 2000 quoted an informant as saying:

In my stilt house I can open the windows and door and see the open sky and the sea. The size of my house is large enough to accommodate all 20 family members when having a family gathering. Can I find a home of such size and beautiful views elsewhere?

The simple fact is that to Tai O's boat people, water represents psychological if not physical safety: to them land is a strange almost hostile environment.

In 1982 the government tried to register all of the people who lived in the 'squats' prior to that year. Those who were registered in 1982 were given the right to move into government housing. But post-1982, circumstances changed. The government attempted to stop the establishment of any and all squatter areas, either legal or illegal. However, the shortage of housing in the Hong Kong area forced people to gravitate towards outer areas. Tai O, which features both *Pang O* and land-based dwellings, can boast a relatively tranquil social environment, free from drug use, major gambling and with little if any theft. There is some alcohol consumption but, according to the locals, 'no problems'. Householders (including *Pang O* occupants) and shop owners can leave their premises unlocked.

### Earlier fishing techniques

The fishing village, one of the oldest forms of social organization, is based upon a lifestyle that reflects a special relationship between humans and the ocean. Fishing activities must be cooperative – not competitive: the distribution of common resources must of necessity be equitable for in the absence of this, cooperation would disintegrate (Borgese, 2001).

Fisher people engage in – and are required to harmonize with – activities that involve others, including builders, gardeners, cooks and metal workers, that is, workers representing a diverse range of activities vital to the successful functioning of the fishing industry. Working harmoniously alongside each other is termed 'horizontal integration' (Borgese, 2001: 6). Decision-making may have to be harmonized with the decisions of the wider community, for example villages at the national, provincial or international level, a process called 'vertical integration'.

Today the fishing industry in Tai O is practically non-existent. But in the 1950s and 1960s the industry was flourishing. Wing (1965) writes:

Drift net fishing was the most popular method. Although various nets [were] used to catch different kinds of fish, they were simply to let the fish pass through the nets.... Fish are caught just behind the head ... they can swim neither backward nor forward. All known as Gill netters, the various types include [the] Melon Seed Net, Lim Tgai Net, Yellow Croaker Net, Sole Net, and General Net.

The Melon Seed net, made of nylon thread, had a 12 pound tension and was 217 ft long by 9 ft deep. The Lim Tgai nylon net had a tension of 4.5 pounds, and was 100 ft long by 2 ft deep. The Yellow Croaker net was made of nylon thread, had a 12 pound tension, and was 400 ft long by 10 ft deep. The nylon Sole net had an 8 pound tension, and was 84 ft long by 5 ft deep. The General use net had a 10 pound tension and was 120 ft long by 4 ft deep (Wing, 1965).<sup>15</sup> Gill nets, made of nylon thread, were usually 400 ft long and 10 ft deep. The holes in the netting were on average 2 inches by 2 inches. A number of rings were attached to the top through which a wooden rod was pushed, making the net float. On the bottom side, a stone was attached to each end. In between, there was a row of lead sinkers, which caused the net to sink a few yards below the surface.

Tai O fishermen also used the 'sunken set' net, a bag 100 ft long and 30 ft deep. Rings were positioned at each corner of the 'mouth' through which two poles were driven down into the seabed. The net was usually fixed at the mouth of the Pearl River where currents were strong. Twenty-nine poles could be used, with 28 fixed connected nets. Wong states:

Different types of fish were caught by different vessels with different fishing equipment. For example, catching tiny fish such as white roe, white rice and cuttlefish would need the small checkered fishing nets from sampans. Dragging vessels used big checkered fishing nets: rod-fishing sampans used hook and bait; shrimp sampans caught prawns and crabs as well as shrimps. Sometimes fishermen ... used bombs [when] fishing. (2000: 70)

The foregoing suggests that boats, fishing and the sea, along with other consistent infrastructure (e.g. *Pang O*) were and are integral components of the Tai O space. In the next section, we explore the tensions between preservation and 'revitalization' facing Tai O village today.

### Tai O today: between preservation and revitalization

There is already evidence of subtle change in Tai O today (in the form of galvanized tin stilt houses) and less subtle change in the form of modern multi-storeyed buildings, e.g. Lung Tin Estate and Lung Hin Court, built by the Housing Authority in a bid to re-house the villagers and end their occupation of the stilt houses. Unfortunately, the presence of these concrete structures compromises the heritage value of Tai O village: they are easily visible because they are the tallest buildings in the area, representing an anomaly with the

traditional landscape and architecture of the village. The native villagers are reluctant to move into these buildings because it would mean vertical living as opposed to the horizontal living they have enjoyed for decades. Also, they would lose valued neighbours to whom the older people in particular had become attached during their lifetimes. The FA's recent discussions with conservationists (2009) revealed that because one of these estates is half-empty, the government seeks to relocate the tenants yet again – possibly to Hong Kong, the plan being to use the building as a tourist hostel. Currently the historic 1902 police station is being converted into boutiques and accommodation, the latter to be priced at HK\$1500 per night. Opening in 2010, it may prove profitable as it will serve adjacent bays as well as Tai O.

With the decline of the traditional agricultural and fishing industries, tourism has become the mainstay of the Tai O economy. Most of the earnings come from tourists, who buy local delicacies such as salted fish and shrimp paste, eat in local restaurants, and buy assorted foodstuffs. However, there is concern that the excessive numbers of tourists who throng the narrow streets over the weekends contribute to pollution (1) through improper waste disposal; (2) by depositing rubbish in the water; and (3) through overcrowding (Chan, 2003: 69–70). While the community welcomes tourism as a source of income for the local population, at the same time they are concerned about their quality of life. They are concerned, for example, about noise pollution – possibly from the proposed tourist hostel – impacting on the quiet tranquillity of their small village. They strive to maintain their social ties and customs: they want to see the introduction of more social services for the ageing population. They seek a delicate balance, one that will preserve their lifestyle and at the same time accommodate a seemingly inevitable, selective and hopefully sensitive tourism development.

The draft recommended revitalization strategy of Tai O is seen by the villagers as 'too commercial' and not oriented towards the local people (Chan, 2003). One of the villagers' major concerns is the threatened removal of some of the stilt houses to make way for the construction of a river wall along Tai O Creek. These structures have not simply been 'boxes' that have housed the Tai O population for decades: they are the repositories of the cherished histories of the generations that have lived in them. The multiple layers that form the stilt houses, that is, the tree bark with layers of metal on top, represent the historical roots of family traditions over many generations. Thus, for multiple reasons, the Tai O people are reluctant to be re-housed in the new Housing Authority estates which in no way conform to their maritime lifestyle and traditions. Being mostly elderly people, they cherish the ease of their daily social interaction with neighbours and the firm non-capitalistic bonds that have evolved over the years. They are extremely proud of – and conscious of – their traditions: the unique social and cultural fabric of Tai O is more than dear to them. Ward's (1985b) writings on 'conscious models' explored the ways in which the actual behaviour of the fishing people is influenced by the traditional pattern of the family and the role of ideological models in promoting the continuity of the socio-cultural system over centuries.

During a consultation meeting with the government, it was revealed that some *Pang O* were to be demolished and replaced by Malaysian-style tourist-oriented stilt structures. This proposal was vehemently opposed by the community members on the grounds that such an architectural style would not integrate well into the environment and history of the Tai O village (Chan, 2003: 90–1).

Other components of the revitalization strategy, such as the construction of an entrance plaza, telescopes for dolphin watching, a waterfront promenade, the re-introduction of salt panning for tourist purposes and a sheltered boat anchorage (SBA) have also given rise to concern regarding their potential impact on the village. The prospect of an SBA was first raised by the Territory Development Department following a survey which found that 200 vessels needed an anchorage site. This gradually translated into a committed project, the Islands District Council viewing it as a catalyst for local economic regeneration. However, during the consultation period, some Tai O social groups expressed their concerns regarding this project: their main concern was the environment and how it would be impacted on by spills from the boats. They expressed concern regarding the dredging of the seabed, which, they claimed, could cause the Tai O Creek to flood. Also, because the mangrove replanting area is adjacent to the SBA, questions arose vis-à-vis the survival of the vegetation (Chan, 2003: 92).

Discussions in October 2009 revealed that the SBA has been completed but there is a total absence of boats. As regards the salt-panning activity, residents in the proposed area claim that an influx of tourists will impact on the serenity of their daily lives – and on the natural wetland environment. They are prepared to join a demonstration should one be mounted (FA's communication with conservationists, October 2009). Conversely, the government suggests that 'salt-pan recovery' will unite the residents and prove educational.

The local population fear that insufficient consideration has been given to the implications of the above activities for this traditional fishing village's natural environment and social fabric. Indeed, more than through a museum, the cultural heritage of Tai O can be experienced through the village itself and its residents. But how to successfully preserve, protect and enhance the traditions and lifestyles of the local community, when sustaining the lives of the villagers means sustaining the attractiveness of the community (Chan, 2003: 91)? In an attempt to force the government to revise its plans, many residents organized a petition opposing the plans. In total, 63 percent of the Tai O people, mostly indigenous people, signed the petition ('Drop Plan to Change Tai O', 2000). Major emphasis was upon the likely irreversible damage that the proposed governmental projects may cause. For example, the villagers cited the second-phase public housing units at Lung Tin Estate. Few units have been occupied since the time of the building's completion. Similarly, the fishing boat berthing area built in 2003 has yielded no economic benefit as the fishermen have opted to tie up at Tai O. The new berthing area's contribution has been to block the beautiful sunset scenery and detract from



the beauty of the surrounding ecological environment. The large-scale excavation works, part of the construction project, have adversely affected the foundations of some of the stilt houses, threatening the lives and properties of the occupants (Wong, 2007).

Today, visitors from mainland China travel to Lantau Island to enjoy Disneyland. Many travel on by bus or boat to visit Tai O, to view its unique stilt houses. However, according to an informant (March 2006), there has been no improvement in the Tai O economy. This may not be of major concern to the elderly who long to continue their 'sampan' tradition: they reminisce about the time when they held sampan races; they recall the 1960s, when Tai O could boast six boat-building factories. Now it only has one, located near Sun Kei Street. Currently (2009) only five shrimp boats work out of Tai O.

Despite the government's plan to establish tourist accommodation, Tai O has no entertainment attractions – only a host of shops selling a variety of fish products. There is no surviving (public) traditional dance/music/painting culture (instrumentalists meet in private), and no evidence of arts and handicrafts. A government proposal to build an off-shore Container Terminal on reclaimed land will attract little tourist interest. However, Tai O's social ties continue to be strengthened in the form of its social space, what Foucault (1984 [1967]) may have termed 'heterotopic' or 'Other' space. Although they are functioning at grassroots level, the gathering together of such people contributes to a consensus which can ultimately lead to empowerment. Borgese (2001) suggests that, over time, the people of Tai O have facilitated their own form of direct democracy, which has arisen out of a sense of individual and collective responsibility and a feeling of commonality of interests. Tai O's history of 'folk' or 'vernacular' fisheries management has its roots in a series of centuries-old extraction techniques, processes that, if exposed to outside influences, could suffer severe environmental damage. New resource extraction techniques, although probably more efficient, may also prove destructive.

'The adoption of local values, beliefs and practices can become a creative tool in designing effective and culture-based programmes' (Mercardo, 2000: 21). Sustainable development is an overarching concept, relating to harmonization of social, environmental and economic considerations in the cause of long-term human development.

The FA's own experience in Tai O suggests that part of the apprehension associated with governmental intervention may be attributable to lack of education and limited English-language/comprehension skills. The proposed government project, printed in English, includes the construction of a 4 ha SBA for 110 small fishing boats, restoration of the historic seawall,<sup>16</sup> the formation of approximately 0.22 ha of land for a future bus terminus, construction of a 0.23 ha promenade, and a mangrove planting area. Whereas the locals feel they will lose the mangroves (to be replaced by an 'artificial environment'), the government proposes protecting the mangroves as clusters, which will be identified, numbered and mapped out before

construction begins. Mangrove clusters will be fenced off with nets or bamboo sticks to avoid encroachment or disturbance by earthworks. The proposed construction of a large mangrove area could see the emergence of a thriving fish nursery, one that could have a positive impact on Tai O fisheries. As well, according to the government, every attempt will be made to save the famous horseshoe crabs and dolphins.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991) contends that there are different levels of space, from very crude, natural space to more complex spatialities, the significance of which is socially produced. Space is a complex social construction (based on values and the social production of meanings), which affects spatial practices and perceptions. Lefebvre further suggests that the social production of space is fundamental to the reproduction of society, hence of a capitalistic hegemony. The present article has suggested that the social production or reproduction of space in the case of Tai O may represent the tensions between (capitalistic) modernization and (values-based) tradition.

From an historical perspective, and looking back on Ward's work (1985a, 1985b), much has changed in Tai O in the period 1940–2009. As Ward (1985a, 1985b) suggests, huge transformations of social forms resulted from the mechanization of fishing boats in the 1960s (and the introduction of nylon nets and radio). Village traditions are being consciously manipulated, in the main by conservationists and pro-government/development locals, to preserve what is clearly an important sense of community embedded in local senses of space and place. Today, traditional fisheries management and modern revitalization seem to confront each other. Our study suggests that historical traditions are fast losing this battle to a governmental inclination – supported by the local pro-development Rural Committee (RC) – to promote tourism, development and modernization. The RC has opened a well-stocked cultural museum in Wing On Street, the ambience of which is severely diminished by the numerous crudely written unwelcoming 'Don't Touch' signs scattered throughout. Another venue has opened selling miniature wooden *Pang O* models. Restaurants – always of interest to tourists – remain unmarked, hence difficult to identify.

The article has highlighted how this small village is being both refigured as heritage and commoditized, a phenomenon which resonates with what Abbas (2004) – in his analysis of key heritage sites – calls 'the aesthetics of disappearance', or what Ku (2001) calls 'hegemonic construction and displacement in Hong Kong'. The article has demonstrated that human space is relational in terms of societal as well as physical structures. Political power and economic relations may seem invisible but, in the case of Tai O, together they influence and produce both physical and symbolic space. Thus, far from

being purely material, human space is mixed and infused with symbolism and meaning (Lehtovuori, 2005). Urry argues:

that time and space should be seen as produced and producing, as contested and determined, and as symbolically represented and structurally organized. There are a variety of times and spaces that intrude at different levels within an adequate social theory. (1991: 160)

While the government's revitalizing project might be aimed at (cosmetic) visual beautification of Tai O, the symbolic and theoretical value of this small village risks being heavily compromised.

A 2009 visit by the FA revealed a split in villager opinion regarding revitalization. While the RC's argument is valid – that the community at large will benefit from development – the conservationists argue that the money allocated would be better spent on infrastructure. Residents have long hoped for sewage disposal upgrade in the form of a piped purification system. Also, and evoking memories of the 2000 fire, conservationists claim that the extant water pipes are too narrow – the volume of water is insufficient to fight fire. Most importantly, in light of the 2008 flooding of Tai O, conservationists argue for more stilt houses rather than concrete walls, claiming that while the former let the water *in*, at the same time they let the water *out*.

## Notes

- 1 Vernacular architecture is defined as architecture built of local materials to suit particular local needs, usually of unknown authorship and making little reference to the chief styles or theories of architecture (Francis, 2004: 1–2). The definition can include a wide variety of domestic and agricultural buildings, industrial buildings, and commercial structures.
- 2 *Danjia* in Putonghua language.
- 3 The Tanka's Cantonese was augmented by a fisheries-specific vocabulary.
- 4 Sites included the local temples which were under construction, i.e. Po Lin, Ling Yan, Kunn Yam monasteries.
- 5 The Tai Chung stream (river) has two mouths. Locals liken it to a money bag with openings at both ends. They believe it is impossible to save money. In the words of one folk song: *Leing bin liu/mou ting hiu* (Both ends flow: money go).
- 6 The Shek Pik reservoir is one of the largest fresh water reservoirs in Hong Kong, covering an area of 1.01 km. See: <http://www.greenlantau.com/> (consulted February 2008).
- 7 Tai O's streets were developed in a 'strip' pattern, each one running parallel with the Tai Chung stream. The average street width is between 1.5 m and 5 m.
- 8 Despite the rate of settlement from sea to land, by 1965 there were still 200 fisher families living at sea in their junks and sampans, with 3500 settled permanently (Wing, 1965).

- 9 A term meaning 'stages': the construction is simple and like assembling a stage.
- 10 *Eusideroxylon zwageri*.
- 11 Our estimations. Also see: <http://editdesign.net/taio.htm> (consulted March 2008).
- 12 According to Hong Kong ordinance, squatters do not have a right to own property (*City Planning*, 2002).
- 13 A rectangular wooden boat, about 7 ft × 20 ft which carried a maximum of 30 people at any given time. Replaced by a footbridge 29 September 1996 (Wong, 2000: 137).
- 14 There is no evidence of gender differentiation in the workplace in Tai O. Women fish, water-blast roads, and tend parks and gardens.
- 15 Regarding the General use nets, our notes state that it had a 101 pound tension. Either this is our error, the author's error – or it is correct.
- 16 The demolition of the seawall was a devastating experience for 'activist' Wong Wai King, who fought every way she knew how to prevent its demolition. In earlier times it served as a typhoon shelter, but it was also home to varieties of fish and crabs. Built in the Ching dynasty, during the reign of Emperor Dian Lung (Quianlong), it was originally 800 ft long, 10 ft wide and five ft 'through'. Currently the Hong Kong government is building a new sea wall.
- 17 For example, see Project No. 7417RO, Improvement Works for Tai O Facelift – Feasibility Study, at: <http://www.cedd.gov.hk/eng/projects/major/hki7417ro.htm> (consulted February 2008).

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