Making Heritage in Hong Kong: A Case Study of the Central Police Station Compound*

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ABSTRACT This article is a case study of state–society–capital conflicts over the preservation of the Central Police Station (CPS) compound in Hong Kong during 2003–08. The conflict was between two fundamentally different approaches to urban space: a cultural economy approach that took culture and space as a source of economic profit, and an opposition discourse of preservation that emphasized cultural, historical and humanistic values as an end. The struggle turned out to be a moderate success for anti-commercialism. Drawing on and extending the notions of collective memory and spatial politics, this article examines how the various civil society actors, in their struggle against commercialism, sought to define and enhance the cultural value of the site through a variety of discourses and practices relating to history and space. It addresses the specific question of why and how certain constructions of collective memory succeed (or fail) to work with certain places in particular instances. The study shows that memories of the CPS compound contained both state-associated and people-associated accounts, between which the former prevailed. The state-associated account was embedded in a familiar, hegemonic story about Hong Kong, which, via an abstract process of symbolization around the notion of the rule of law, successfully turned the compound into an iconic symbol of identification for the city. Beyond this, the civil society actors sought also to generate a sense of lived space associated with the people, and the outcome was mixed.

In Hong Kong, the Central Police Station (CPS) compound was officially listed as a historic monument in 1995. Despite its legal status, uncertainties remained as to how and how far it would be preserved and developed as a heritage site in the future. This article is a case study of state–society–capital conflicts over the preservation of the compound during 2003–08. The conflict was basically between

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two fundamentally different approaches to urban space in a city that was dominated by economic interests. On the one hand, because of its prime location in Central, the compound was considered to have much commercial potential. Commercialism became a major guiding principle over the project both by the government and by the developers (space-for-money). On the other hand, a new opposition discourse of preservation was gathering momentum in civil society – among architects, preservationists, local residents, district councillors and the press – that increasingly emphasized humanistic values and concerns regarding heritage, history, arts and the community (culture-in-space). However, the compound did not contain a reservoir of histories and memories that were well documented or publicly available; and given the nature of the site, it was not associated with the everyday life of the majority of the people in ways that evoked fond memories about the place. In this instance, it would be instructive to study the case not only as a defence of culture against commercialism by civil society, but also as a process of social construction of history and meanings for a place about which knowledge, discourses and accounts of personal experiences did not readily exist.

The notion of historical memory or collective memory is useful for this purpose. It enables us to address the questions of whose history or collective memory we are considering, and also who participate in the mnemonic processes of remembering associated with a place. In this connection, theories on spatial politics offer another useful starting point, especially with regard to the spatial configuration of power relations. This article seeks to show how the different civil society actors might draw on a mix of strategies, representations and experiences in constructing and contesting the meanings of a site in varied relations to the hegemonic narratives, which could be state-related, people-related, both or neither. This approach will shed light on the intricate question of why and how certain constructions of collective memory succeed (or fail) to work with certain places in particular instances.

Our study of the CPS compound will show that memories of the site contained both state-associated and people-associated accounts in the public sphere,


between which the former prevailed. A deeper analysis reveals that the state-associated account presented a benign reading of colonial history that tied in more with a relatively stable, coherent and familiar Hong Kong story prevailing in society. In other words, it drew on a hegemonic narrative that had deposited in society as a major framework for collective remembering over the years. More specifically, the meaning of the site was created through symbolization via a discourse of the rule of law (rather than through a deep engagement with historiography). In this way, the benign state-associated account succeeded in turning the compound into an iconic symbol of identification for Hong Kong. The account, albeit not without tensions, therefore went relatively little challenged. Beyond this abstract level of symbolization, the civil society actors also tried to generate a sense of lived space associated with the people, though this strategy did not meet with equal success. With such an array of discursive and cultural practices, the struggle turned out to be a moderate success for anti-commercialism.

**Representation of Space under Global Capitalism: The Rise of a Cultural Economy Discourse**

Space is produced, reproduced and transformed through various social and cultural practices.3 Lefebvre proposes that space is a dynamic entity produced through the interaction of three elements: spatial practices (perceived or physical space), representations of space (conceived space) and spaces of representations (lived space).4 Today the capitalist state increasingly extends abstract conceived space to promote capital accumulation and pursue urban entrepreneurialism in the global economy.5 This has had the effect of homogenizing and fragmenting local lived space. Hong Kong has long been governed under the vision of an economic city. In the 1980s, long-term territorial development plans were formulated to position the city as a top-notch financial centre in the region and in the world. In terms of representation of space, the idea of a global financial centre that is expanding by leaps and bounds is translated into a set of spatial practices in Central and its neighbouring areas, including massive reclamation, land re-zoning to commercial use, constant building and re-building of super high-rise commercial buildings, and expansion of roads and transport. Under a hypercapitalist mode of production, preservation is often considered as an undesirable


4 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*.

intervention into the operation of the land market. And culturally and politically, back in the colonial days, the issue of preservation of old (colonial) buildings either received little public attention – due to a weak sense of heritage and history in society – or could become emotionally charged under the rubric of nationalism. The failed attempts to save the Kowloon–Canton Railway Station and the Hong Kong General Post Office by some preservation groups in the 1970s were illustrative examples. The legacy of a weak preservation culture, which gives rise to what Abbas calls a culture of disappearance, remained after the handover.

In Central, beside the business district is an upscale Soho area that has evolved out of a different facet of commercialism: consumption and entertainment. Around 1997, a new discourse of cultural economy began to emerge by which the government sought to expand the Soho area and link it to the CPS compound and other nearby heritage sites (such as Man Mo Temple and various places bearing Sun Yat-sen’s footprints) for tourism purposes. Tourism is not a new feature in Hong Kong, but the notion of cultural or heritage tourism brings a new idea of the commercial potential of historical sites. Cultural economy can incorporate culture into the economy and subsume it under market considerations.

In principle, the government’s discourse of cultural economy allows more room for the development of culture and heritage than in the past. However, it is in effect a product of the deepening of the market principle under the ideology of neo-liberalism and a worldwide expansion of the tourist industry. The gist of the discourse is to turn culture, arts and heritage into business while passing the economic burden of restoration, maintenance and development from the government to the private sector. This new discourse has been spearheaded by a newly established Tourism Bureau, amidst economic downturn as a result of the Asian financial crisis. In 2001, in an attempt to restructure the economy, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa unveiled a HK$18 billion (US$2.3 billion) plan to boost tourism. One of the main projects was the adaptation of the area around Lan Kwai Fong and Hollywood Road into a cultural and historical district. In conjunction with this, the government sought to re-zone the CPS compound from public and community use (or what was formally known as “Government, Institute and Community”) to “other specified uses” annotated “historical building preserved for cultural, community and commercial uses.” The definition was broadened to cover commercial uses, and in 2002 the government appointed a consultant to assess the tourist potential of the site.

8 Ackbar Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
A fine line could be drawn between the government’s cultural economy approach and civil society’s preservationist approach. In April 2003, conflicts began to emerge when the government earmarked the CPS compound for tourism-related restoration and development and prepared to schedule for a private tender. Following an earlier suggestion by a business group, Swire Properties, in 1999, the government envisaged turning the place into a retail and entertainment complex, with a slice of the project reserved for cultural and community use. Under a commercial framework, the project was placed under the Economy Development and Labour Bureau – championed by the Tourism Commission under the Bureau – rather than the Home Affairs Bureau that was supposed to be in charge of heritage. The government’s plan to invite private-sector bidding followed the market model, like for the marine police station in Tsimshatsui. That is, a premium was paid to the government for the development rights over a period of time, and that money went into the general revenue. Private developers saw business opportunities in the project and suggested that the government relax the preservation-related restrictions. The government therefore set very broad parameters for the bidding for the CPS compound.

Society, however, had undergone a value change in recent years. By 2003, a number of events had led to increased public concern over cultural and heritage issues, such as the controversy over the West Kowloon Cultural District, the legal battle against reclamation in Central and Wanchai, and the campaign over the “Wedding card street.” More specifically, the government’s recent track record with regard to heritage preservation caused much public unease, as in the case of the marine police station in Tsimshatsui where it was revealed that the developer chopped down the old trees to make way for a six-star hotel. At stake was possible commercial encroachment upon a heritage site – public space – the uses of which were yet to be defined. Thus, following the government’s announcement of the plan in April 2003, an opposition movement began to develop and gather momentum within civil society.

Confronting Commercialism
The struggle was initiated by a wealthy family, the Hotung Group, including such people as Ho Hung-Ngai and Ho Yau-chung. The Group provided a counter-proposal to the government’s plan with an emphasis on arts, culture and the principle of non-profitability. In July 2004, it put forward its concept of a non-profit development backed up by the handsome amount of HK$500 million (about US $64 million). It proposed to convert the heritage site into a massive arts complex funded by donations, to be run by a non-profit foundation or trust. The counter-proposal received strong support from the press and in society. It kicked off an opposition movement against commercialism spearheaded by an alliance of architects, preservationists and district councillors. The opposition discourse, around the idea of heritage preservation, asserted itself primarily as a challenge
against commercialism – or against the government playing into the hands of the business sector – with regard to four interrelated sets of issues: non-profit-making versus profit-driven operation; public space versus privatized use; open process versus closed-door dealing; and historical value versus ahistorical/anti-historical development. The idea of non-commercialism as a parameter for developing the future uses of the site remained a cornerstone of the opposition throughout the struggle.

The newly composed Central and Western District Board was among the most active actors in support of preservation of the site. Between 2003 and 2007, the board consisted mostly of democrats who had achieved a landslide victory in the elections in 2003 in the aftermath of mass demonstrations against legislation on national security. The democrats were neither pro-government nor pro-business but were generally sympathetic to the preservationist cause. Nearly all the board members agreed to the Hotung plan, and the district board passed a motion opposing the proposed tender by the government:

We felt there was no citizen participation and no transparency in the private tender process. We also felt the government was following a solely commercial rationale … The tender documents did not emphasize the importance of the uniqueness of the site, its cultural heritage, as well as the need to keep it a public place.\(^9\)

The motion registered a belief that a public asset of such cultural value as the compound belonged to society and should be used for preservation and community purposes. The government’s proposal to make it a tourism project under the Tourism Bureau could bypass the legislature and thereby make the process much less transparent and publicly accessible than the public expected. The district board also allied with the Hong Kong Institute of Architects and the Conservancy Association to form the CPS Heritage Taskforce.\(^{10}\) They launched forums, conducted public opinion surveys and pursued an active media strategy. Under a common framework of preservation, they maintained that the compound had tremendous historical value, that the tendering principle should give priority to its structural integrity rather than financial benefits, and that the tendering process should be shifted from the Tourism Bureau to the Home Affairs Bureau. Joining the cause, residents from the district (prompted by district councillor Kam Nai-wai) formed the Action Group on the Protection of the CPS Historic Compound.

On the other side, however, the business community was vehemently in support of the government’s proposal. Within the legislature, the Liberal Party urged the government to pass the bid as soon as possible; outside the legislature, the Association of Architectural Practices – with a membership of more than 60 architectural firms – threatened to take radical action if the government continued to put essential projects on hold. It was obvious that the established

\(^{10}\) It was the second time that the Hong Kong Institute of Architects and the Conservancy Association, represented by Bernard Wan-fung Lin and Albert Kwok-tak Lai respectively, had co-operated over preservation issues since the campaign to protect the Victoria Harbour a few years before.
architectural firms also had business interests at stake. The government had already shown itself more inclined towards commercial considerations, as evidenced by its insisting on pushing ahead with the tender in the first instance.

However, the first struggle against commercialism did result in some gestures of concession by the government. While rejecting the Hotung proposal on the grounds of competitive bidding, it agreed to adjust the imbalance between preservation and commercialism. For instance, it said it would consider reducing the weighting of the land premium in tenders for development of the site and attaching more importance to heritage preservation, environmental and traffic considerations, and community and tourism benefits. In the face of strong opposing voices, it also backtracked on the timetable regarding the tender, though the public were left in the dark as to what was to happen next.

In the meantime, another crux of the debates lay with the breadth and depth of preservation, which also manifested itself as conflicts over preservation versus commercialism, and over proper/democratic versus improper procedures. When the site was listed as a monument in 1995, the general idea was that the entire compound would be preserved. However, in October 2004, a paper prepared by the Tourism Commission and the Economic Development and Labour Bureau for discussion at the Legislative Council stated that only 17 of the 18 buildings were likely to be preserved at the site. They included four police station buildings built in 1860 that were to be fully preserved and another 13 built in the early 20th century that were to be conserved externally while the interiors could be altered. The list did not include the building at the entrance to the Victoria Prison (F Hall in the upper platform area) on the grounds that it was modified in the 1950s after the original building had been dismantled, and that it did not match the architectural style of the surrounding heritage. Clearing of the hall would allow a new high-rise building with a height restriction of 70 metres, which would provide lucrative commercial opportunities. The paper was drafted by the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) which had given a new heritage assessment in 2003, approved by the Antiquities Advisory Board. A fresh round of controversy brewed about the site after it was revealed that the AMO decision was made without a quorum. Similar problems happened before with other sites, reflecting some institutional flaws with the watchdog. That is, members were all appointed by the government while the entire body operated with little transparency or accountability.

The new assessment by AMO raised a new round of debates and concerns regarding the meaning of history and heritage. It triggered the rise of history talks in the public sphere, through which the various civil society actors sought to affirm and enhance the historical value of the site, with an emphasis on maintaining its structural integrity as well as historical atmosphere. The history talks also enabled these actors to mount a sustained campaign with a view to conserving all the buildings and developing the site into a non-profit venue. The campaign involved a series of activities to move the movement forward from showing a general anti-commercial stance to confronting the issues of history, memory and lived space.
Remembering, or Not Remembering, an Epoch in Space

The CPS compound consisted of three groups of buildings: the Victoria Prison, the Central Police Station and the former Central Magistracy. The Victoria Prison was erected in 1841, and was the first building constructed of durable materials in Hong Kong by the British. Most of the buildings within the compound were damaged by bombing during the Second World War, but the prison was re-opened in 1946 after repairs. It housed prisoners and later detained refugees and illegal immigrants and those subject to deportation. The Central Police Station was built in 1864, with other blocks added in 1910 and 1925, and consisted of four storeys in classical style with Doric-style columns. It had served as the headquarters for law enforcement throughout the territory until the Second World War, and remained in use as a police station until 2004. The Central Magistracy, completed in 1914, was built with red-brick walls and concrete pillars in a Greek revival style. It was closed in January 1991, thereafter being used for police and correctional services clubs and administration.

Defining heritage: representations of space in terms of architectural and socio-historical values

The government conceded to postponing the tender without putting in place further plans, creating a period of uncertainty and indeterminacy. Civil society made use of this undefined time to create new meanings and open up possibilities about the site via varied spatial, symbolic and cultural strategies. First, as the idea of architectural value had been spelled out in the official government documents, as represented by the AMO, this was picked up in public discussion by architects, preservationists and newspaper writers. From the perspective of architectural aesthetics, the compound showed a classical style of its time, carrying characteristic British Edwardian and Victorian styles with certain Doric and Greek revival elements. It formed the oldest and the largest architectural complex under colonial rule. As the AMO document put it: “The building is a fine example of Greek-revival architecture with its front and rear designed to impress the public of the majesty of the law.” Rarity further added to the historical value of the architecture, as most of the colonial buildings with this kind of design had already been demolished in the course of economic development. Along this line, individual architects probed deeper into the historical relationship between the architectural design and the legal system.11 There also emerged interesting accounts about how the design of the historic buildings, despite its European origin, was adapted to the local climate and environment as evidenced by, for example, Chinese roofs, wide corridors and wooden window blinds. The compound, which in the past had been teased as a piece of second-rate British

architecture, was then considered in a positive light as “the forerunner of Chinese–Western fusion.”

Secondly, and more importantly, the discourse of architectural aesthetics was intermingled with other narratives that exalted the site as an icon of Hong Kong with insurmountable value regarding its historical origin, symbolic meanings and geographical location. These ideas were expressed in an array of channels including newspapers, books and exhibition materials. Unlike the 1970s, when people had reverted to a denigrating discourse of nationalism versus colonialism, the public began to give due respect to history for its own sake. Such a framework stripped a reading of the colonial past of any ideological baggage: “It is just a matter of history and culture, and one need not think politically in terms of honour and disgrace associated with the nation.” An idea of history with a neutral meaning was used as a primary framework for collective remembering. In this connection, a discourse began to arise that related cultural preservation to the question of identity. This new breed of identity talks searched for a link with the past through history and remembering. For example, a long-term resident in the district endeavoured to record his recollections about the site in a book entitled *Collective Memory*:

In the past, both the colonial government and most of the Hong Kong people held a frame of mind as sojourner and did not show due respect and care for history and culture. But today as we take root here, being born here and growing up here, the task of cultural preservation would appear to be all the more important. Only after having implanted our roots will we be able to take over the past and move ahead and to continue to develop.

The metaphor of roots clearly indicated an orientation towards a time past, which asserted the value of history for its own sake, and sought to preserve and relate particular histories and heritage to the common experiences of the people in a generation and across generations.

A flurry of history talks appeared in the public sphere as a counterweight against commercialism. Detailed knowledge of the history of the place, however, was not readily available as there was no real record of documentation, by historians, academics or journalists. This left a void of historical meanings yet to be filled. For instance, some public critics took into account the compound’s origin, location and architecture, and considered it as marking a distinction from the traditional Chinese buildings in the rural areas in the northern part of the territory:

For the history of the Hong Kong Island was different from that of the New Territories, the latter basically being part of a long-standing Chinese history ... However, the Island only had very few native residents, and its development was based in colonization, commerce and migration. The Central Police Station compound was a product born against such a historical

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13 Editor, *Hong Kong Economic Times*, 30 April 2003, author’s translation.
In this quotation, a sense of boundary was being drawn and reinforced between Hong Kong and traditional China, between centre and periphery. The distinction was an internal one within the territory, rather than juxtaposed against an external other on the Mainland. The underlying framework of the collective remembering of colonial history was organized through several overlapping dichotomies: urban versus rural, modern versus traditional, and Western versus Chinese. A deeper question is, what were the implications of such a distinction for a Hong Kong narrative? As it developed, the representation of space over the architecture became endowed with specific spatial, historical and symbolic meanings at the core of the definition of a Hong Kong identity. Most conspicuously, a benign state-centred framework that equated colonial rule with the rule of law development began to prevail in public discourse.

Recounting a Hong Kong narrative: the “rule of law” as a collective framework for remembering

The compound, which concentrated law enforcement, courts and correctional services in one place, laid the early foundation for legal development in the territory. As stated on AMO’s website, the compound formed “a group of historical architecture representing law and order in Hong Kong.” Public discourse was mostly pitched at an abstract symbolic level around the idea of law as the basis for remembering, historicizing and narrating, or for a claim to collective memory. The prevalent view that the compound was a historical icon associated with the development of “law and order” or “rule of law” in fact constituted a familiar Hong Kong story. The Hong Kong story contains a narrative of development with an origin traceable to a specific time and associated with a specific place, having encounters and experiences of its own while being differentiated from an “other,” both internally and externally. Hong Kong had been inhabited long before the British came, but the years of colonial rule were considered as marking a new phase of development in its history. Spatially, Central was the base of the British political and military establishment and was once dubbed the Victorian City. It also quickly flourished into a focal economic base for commerce and trading activities, making itself the centre of an ever-expanding urban region, differentiated from the rural and less developed areas in the periphery. Over the years, it remained the political, economic and cultural hub of Hong Kong. The compound, located in this area, signified the origin of colonial rule back in the mid 19th century. The Victoria Prison

16 The meaning of law remains ambiguous in public discourse, for in Chinese, the notion of fazhi may underpin a rights-based conception of “rule of law” within the British common law tradition, and it may also mean “law and order” in a more general sense that stresses “rule according to the law.” See Agnes S. Ku, “Negotiating law, rights, and civil autonomy: from the colonial to the post-colonial regimes,” in Agnes S. Ku and Ngai Pun (eds.), Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong: Community, Nation and the Global City (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 157–74.
was the first permanent British public architecture in Hong Kong. It was built even before the British secured the colony, that is, before the colonial government was formally established.

On a narrative level, the compound was considered to mark a process of development from a more desolate past to modern civilization. As described in the exhibition organized by the district board, it was “the originating place” for such a development. The narrative carried a subtext with a benign reading of the colonial government, which was looked upon as an agent of development. Historical anthropologists might have contested such a linear interpretation of the past, citing evidence of a longer history of civilization before the commencement of colonial rule (as presented in the exhibition in the Hong Kong Museum of History). Yet as far as public discourse was concerned, a considerable amount of commentary focused on the history of the compound within a similar framework of progress and modernization, with a specific anchor on the origin of urban civilization as well as the rule of law that came with it:

Although Hong Kong was already inhabited a long time ago, for an account of its urban development, one had to start from the 1840s. Hong Kong did not make an urban appearance until that time. Central is the base for the establishment of Hong Kong ... With the legal system, the city began to develop and urban life began to grow.17

In brief, the compound was elevated to an almost sacrosanct status through the rule of law framework within a hegemonic narrative of progress. The discourse of aesthetics, the reference to histories and the symbolization all worked together to turn the place into a culturalized space filled with historical and heritage significance. This registered a benign state-centred discourse under which colonial rule was equated with the rule of law that subsequently brought about progress and prosperity in society.

Why did the rule of law discourse prevail? A critical look at the discrepancy between local historiography and the general public discourses would be instructive, and would lead to the notion of collective memory for an explanation. In the former, some scholars have advocated abandoning the linear, one-dimensional narrative that typically portrays Hong Kong as a “barren-rock-turned-capitalist-paradise” in official discourse; they seek instead to show the complex, multi-fold relations between the state and society ranging from repression/resistance to collaboration.18 For instance, the historian Munn has presented a rather mixed account of the legal system under early colonial rule.19 On the one hand, early officials were convinced of the importance of the development of

18 Ku and Ngai Pun, *Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong*; Law Wing Sang (ed.), *Shui de chengshi? Zhan hou Xianggang de gongmin wenhua yu zhengzhi lunshu* (*Whose City? Civic Culture and Political Discourses in Post-War Hong Kong*) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ngo Tak Wing (ed.), *Hong Kong’s History – State and Society under Colonial Rule* (London: Routledge, 1999); Ngai Pun and Lai Man Yee (eds.), *Shu xie cheng shi: Xianggang de shen fen yu wen hua* (*Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity*) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2003).
19 Christopher Munn, “The criminal trial under early colonial rule,” in Ngo Tak Wing, *Hong Kong’s History*, pp. 46–73.
equal laws to draw wealthy Chinese merchants to the place. Yet on the other hand, the legal and judicial system was – rather than the neutral, beneficent institution as had been assumed by some historians – “a rickety, unpredictable contraption that failed to deliver justice [and] systematically handicapped Chinese defendants.” Legal reforms in the direction of equality were, in the words of Munn, only “recent achievements” in the past few decades.

The notion of collective memory, however, underpins an approach to the past that is different from local historiography. Collective memory is the active past informed by the present, yet it is not entirely free-floating or autonomous from the past but is sedimented in existing discourses and undergoes an ongoing process of negotiation through time. From a quasi-presentist perspective, the rule of law was not only a legacy from the past but also carries much relevance and significance for contemporary Hong Kong, especially for a generation that had gone through the political transition during the 1980s and the 1990s. Although a sense of local belonging gradually evolved in the post-Second World War years, especially after the mass riots in the mid-1960s, the transitional period was critical for a much more conscious articulation of a Hong Kong identity. Such an identity was constituted through a hegemonic narrative of economic and governing success, in which the rule of law was considered one of the few major pillars. Hegemonic is used to mean that the narrative was not only actively promoted by the government from above but widely shared among and reinforced by the people in society. In a more political reading, the rule of law tradition in Hong Kong was juxtaposed against the rule by law system on the Mainland, underscoring a sense of difference under the “one country, two systems” framework. More specifically, after 1989, in a context where the pace of democratic reform would be circumscribed by the Basic Law, the rule of law discourse was instituted to conjecture the possibility of rights under political authoritarianism for post-handover Hong Kong. Although the rule of law was subject to conflicting interpretations, it indeed continued, on the symbolic and discursive levels, to be a major general framework for collective identification among the Hong Kong people in the post-handover era. This was shown by the conflicts over the right of abode, the Public Order Ordinance and the legislation on national security. In other words, the repeated reference to the salient idea of the rule of law in the debate over the CPS compound was largely shaped

21 Ibid. p. 67.
22 Schwartz, “Memory as a cultural system,” and “History, commemoration, and belief.”
23 Olick and Levy, “Collective memory and cultural constraints.”
26 Ku, “Hegemonic construction, negotiation and displacement,” and “Negotiating the space of civil autonomy.”
by a discursive framework that had been in the public sphere over more than two decades.

In most instances, public critics were simply reiterating the idea that the rule of law was fundamental for Hong Kong’s growth and success. This was a neutralized reading without implicating the issues of nationalism, colonialism or Hong Kong–Mainland relations. A small number of critics presented a strong reading of Hong Kong identity in concentrating on the idea that the rule of law provided the cornerstone that distinguished Hong Kong from the Mainland:

In treasuring these old architectures, does it mean that we are holding onto the colonial days? … But … where does the “one country, two system” idea come from … If not because Hong Kong already has had a system different from China, if not because Hong Kong has undergone a colonial time, if not because the compound of the Central Police Station, the Victoria Prison and the Central Magistracy has laid the foundation for the rule of law tradition since more than 100 years ago, how would the other system out of “one country, two systems” have been possible?27

This quotation was from a well-known critic,28 and probably reflects a sentiment that prevails among the pro-rights groups today. Although such a politicized reading was not prominent in the history talks over the compound, the critic’s writings testified how the narrative of Hong Kong–Mainland distinction remains a meta-discourse in society by which one could make a strong claim to historical value and local identity.

The benign statist reading was not without dissents, but they did not amount to a serious challenge to the prevailing framework. The dissenting views came from two disparate sources. First, a small number of critics and writers offered alternative accounts with slightly different emphases rather than a directly oppositional reading. For example, some emphasized the hard efforts of the people in contributing to the success of Hong Kong without challenging the success of the legal system:

After occupying Hong Kong, Britain strengthened its rule by setting up a British legal system that blended colonialism with racism. Over more than 100 years in the past, owing to the ceaseless effort by the Hong Kong people, a good rule of law system was being gradually established.29

And public critics who tried to keep a critical distance from the more familiar hegemonic narrative associated with the rule of law opted to re-interpret the meaning of colonial history rather than downgraded the value of colonial heritage:

It’s been often said that the British have brought about a sound legal system, a clean and efficient civil service tradition … These are all facts but they do not present a full picture of colonial rule … In the past, our cultural imagination was stifled by the British … Now, we search

28 Li Yi started up the magazine “The Seventies” (later changed to “The Nineties”) and wrote extensively on China’s political and economic issues in the local press. He once openly confessed that he became disillusioned with the Chinese regime after the downfall of the Gang of Four.
29 Ho Yiu-seng, Collective Memory of the Central Police Station, p. ii, author’s translation.
Colonial rule not only brought about the rule of law but also turned Hong Kong into an overly commercialized city. It gave rise to the city’s history of growth and yet at the same time undermined its historical memories. Ironically, it was against this strand of commercialism bred by colonialism that public critics such as Mok sought to place culture and history – through the icons and artefacts of colonial history – squarely back at the centre of the pro-preservation struggle.

As the second source of criticism, the left-wing newspapers carried some dissenting opinions with a nationalistic outlook, but these came from a very small number of individual writers while the editorials showed a generally sympathetic stance for the preservation cause. The strongest version of a counter-narrative looked like this:

If the originating place for Hong Kong’s civilization was the Victoria Prison, it would only be “civilization” with a yoke, and also one tinged with the blood of war and the dirt of opium … Hong Kong had several thousand years of civilization and history before the Western colonizers arrived.31

This somewhat echoed the discourses in the 1970s that belittled the heritage value of colonial architecture as compared to the time-honoured development of Chinese culture. However, with the rise of a distinct Hong Kong identity, this narrative had failed to gain ground among the general populace since the political transition, and it further lost appeal in recent years in the midst of a rising discourse that affirmed the value of history itself. Such rhetoric appeared to represent a lone, old-fashioned view without a strong following.

**Fragmented collective memories associated with the people**

What happened when the mode of remembering shifted from the state to the people? Apart from the state-related memory, there also existed several types of people-related memories, but some of them were subsumed under the state and some remained fragmentary accounts without being able to strike much public accord through a collective framework of the time. Hence they failed to be tied to a Hong Kong story with an equal symbolic significance to the state-centred account. The compound was associated with certain groups of people, namely police officers and staff on one side and prisoners and detainees on the other. At one time newspapers published stories about memorable episodes and experiences by individual police officers and attendants.32 These stories were largely fragmentary, episodic and random accounts from personal memories, which

32 A number of names, ranging from senior officers to office assistants, appeared in the press recounting these stories, including Ho Ming-sen, Cheung Fook-shing and Lee Siu-on. See *Sing Tao Daily*, 31 January 2005 and *Ming pao*, 31 January 2005.
neither evoked fond feelings from the public nor built up a coherent narrative about Hong Kong. Thus they were not picked up again after a few reports.

As for the prisoners and arrestees, in principle they might better represent “the people” than the police officers who were agents of the state. In one type of account, public critics dwelled on historical facts associated with particular figures of public significance. For example, they tried to dig out stories about revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, which raised disputes about whether he was once housed in the Victoria Prison or not. They also recalled the famous patriotic poet Dai Wang-shu, whose works and experiences evoked memories of deep suffering during his imprisonment under Japanese occupation in the 1940s. However, memories of these significant people and events were fragmented and rooted in the past within a national framework rather than carrying a link with the present or being tied to a Hong Kong narrative. In another type of account, most of the prisoners and detainees were basically identified as illegal immigrants, asylum seekers and law-breakers who, being isolated from the general public, were only defined in generic and anonymous categories rather than recognized as individuals. Moreover, these categories of people were conventionally regarded as deviants from the social norm or outsiders to society. There were therefore no ready narratives or discursive space that either related their stories to the development of Hong Kong or challenged the hegemonic narrative with these stories, while the potential of tying the stories to a collective history was yet to be exploited.

Despite the statist overtone associated with the compound, an idea of collective memory was evoked to suggest a relationship of the place with the people, either collectively or as individuals in a generation or across generations, who shared some common experiences pertaining to a particular historical era. As a rule, the notion of collective memory can help reinforce and enrich history talks by adding a subjective touch to people’s accounts of the past. However, difficulties arose when people sought to apply the idea to this particular case. For example, some argued that the compound had had limited public access and therefore little significance to the everyday life of the people, and collective memory would not apply to it.33 This implied that public accessibility was the minimum basis for a claim to collective memory. Using the same logic but turning it around, pro-preservation activists insisted that the entrance to Victoria Prison, Block F, be retained. Kam Nai-wai of the Central and Western District Board from the pro-democracy camp said that the building, together with the police station report room, was one that had enjoyed “direct access by the public” in the past few decades, and that “it formed part of the collective memory of Hong Kong citizens.”34 On 24 October 2004, prompted by the Action Group on the Protection of the Central Police Station Historical Compound, several hundred

34 *SCMP*, 23 October 2004.
people joined hands outside the compound to call for the preservation of all 18 main buildings and development of the site into a non-profit venue.

The claim to preserve the entrance as part of the entirety was apparently grounded not so much in historical value as in collective memory. Discursively, the historical value of a place might not necessarily generate collective memory whereas collective memory would presuppose some sort of social value passed down from the past. But in this particular instance, collective memory became a rhetorical ploy, a cognitive claim, rather than a process filled with acts and accounts of remembering. No stories related to the entrance were recounted, on either a personal or a collective level. As far as the entrance building Block F was concerned, the claim to collective memory would appear to be relatively weak.

Creating spatial experiences through representational practices

To an average citizen, the compound – consisting mainly of police offices and prisons – was a place bearing little personal memory or immediate experience. The sense of lived space was too thin for the majority to be able to conjure up deep sentiments. Viewed from another angle, however, it was precisely because of its relative lack of public accessibility and the people’s sense of unfamiliarity with it that the compound was like a forbidden place suddenly opened up for public visits. The sense of strangeness and mystery about the place aroused much curiosity or “a morbid fascination with prison life.”35 Thus apart from the abstract discourse of the rule of law, the civil groups also launched a series of activities that turned the compound into a re-lived space to create a sense of intimacy with the past and cultivate a space of creativity for the present. As shown below, the discourses arising out of these activities were in part subsumed in a benign statist framework and in part impregnated with other possibilities.

In September 2004, in a forum organized by the district board, Hong Kong Institute of Architects and Conservancy Association, the Institute of Architects expressed the idea that the CPS compound lacked the quality of lived space for most people and suggested that the site be opened up for public visits. The idea was to let the people acquire a deeper, more solid and more intimate sense of history through establishing an experiential relationship with the place. This strategy was intended to educate the public on the significance of maintaining the compound’s structural integrity as well as historical atmosphere. The three organizations organized open days, guided tours, lectures, design competitions and exhibitions. In the process, more residents were mobilized to join the cause of preservation. The formation of the Central and Western District Concern Group was a case in point.

The idea of an open day was initially proposed by the district board but was taken over by the Tourist Bureau on the grounds that the compound should belong to the entire society rather than a particular district. The first events, in early 2005, succeeded in arousing people’s interest in the site but did little to deepen their

35 SCMP, 6 January 2007.
understanding of history. In the autumn of 2006, the district board initiated its own effort to enhance history by organizing historical tours, field trips and public lectures in the compound. Joining the cause, developer Henderson Land and sister company Town Gas jointly donated money to run more public open days. These drew a large number of people to the site. In these activities, it was mainly from the angle of management of prison life that the public came to terms with the histories of the compound. Participants recounted the details of what they saw regarding the changing conditions of imprisonment from a human rights perspective – for instance, from poor hygiene and differential arrangements for Chinese and Western prisoners in the early days to increased improvement of facilities over time, as well as accommodation of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and 1980s, and the formal abolition of the death penalty in 1993. The discourse on human rights, which had a close affinity to the rule of law framework, was in part subsumed under a benign statist reading.

In the course of the struggle against commercialism, while the tours helped to broaden the people’s sense of history in orienting them to the compound’s past, the place was also given an added meaning as a public space for cultural activities pertaining to the present through other creative uses. For example, in early 2008, an exhibition on “The Hong Kong Shenzhen Bi-City Biennial of Urbanism/Architecture” was organized by the Hong Kong Institute of Architects, the Hong Kong Institute of Planners and the Hong Kong Designers Association together with the Shenzhen Planning Bureau. The event put together architecture, design and urban planning in an extensive exhibition that showcased works by leading international and local professionals. According to the curator, Eric Leung, while much of the artwork used the theme of freedom versus imprisonment, the purpose of the exhibition was not so much to relate art to the history of the place as to explore the spatial possibilities of the place in an artistic fashion. For instance, one piece of artwork allowed visitors to imprison themselves for one minute and read what the previous prisoners had written on the wall. The exhibition, without necessarily revealing more about the history of the place, blended with the physical and spatial layout of the compound and extended the creative possibilities of the site into a living cultural space. As such, it was more present- than past-looking. Through such activities, the uses of the site remained open to new definitions.

Concessions, Successes and Unresolved Issues

The campaign started as an opposition to commercialism, with an emergent vision of turning the CPS compound into a heritage or cultural site to be run on a non-commercial basis. The struggle that ensued was aimed at boosting the historical and cultural value of the site so as to counteract the commercial line of thinking dominant within the government and the business sector. Was this anti-commercial

36 The compound was first opened on three successive weekends in January 2005. Following popular demand in 2006, it hosted six open days on three consecutive weekends again in January 2007.
struggle successful? As mentioned above, there was a period of uncertainty and inde-
terminacy when the government conceded to postponing the tender in 2004. The gov-
ernment did not put in place further plans at that time, which allowed the public a
relatively free hand in forging new meanings for the compound.

In October 2007, after three years, it was suddenly announced in the press that a
well-established non-profit organization, Hong Kong Jockey Club, would run the
project to restore the CPS compound into a vibrant, iconic, cultural landmark com-
prising a mix of cultural, heritage and commercial elements. The public had been
unaware of any talks between the Club and the government, and the news was
received with mixed responses. On the one hand, it was a major concession for the
project to go to a non-profit rather than commercial organization. To this extent,
the struggle against commercialism ended in a victory. On the other hand, preserva-
tionists and the local residents remained apprehensive over two issues: first, more
than half of the venues would be adapted for commercial use; and second, a tower
with a 160-metre viewing deck, comprising bamboo-scaffolding-inspired building
beams designed by internationally famous architects,37 would be built on the existing
upper courtyard. The new catchword was “revitalization.” While the public gener-
ally supported a non-profit-making approach, they were against the newly designed
tower that appeared to be completely out of proportion with the heritage compound
and exceeded the maximum height set at 77 metres by the Antiquities Advisory
Board in 2004.

After another six months of public consultation, the government finally, while
approving the Club’s proposal, conceded that an observation tower would not be
in sight in the future design (though the removal of the controversial scaffold-like
design would be left entirely to the architects). This was another major concession
to the public. Nevertheless, a number of issues remain undecided and unresolved,
including, for instance, the fate of Victoria Prison block F, the channels for public
participation regarding the future uses of the compound, and whether or not a
history museum would be set up.

Conclusion

The struggle over the CPS compound, which turned out to be a moderate success,
documents not only civil society’s resistance against corporate and government
power but also a defence of history and culture (culturalized space) against com-
mercialism. Kicked off by a counter-proposal by the Hotung family group, an
opposition campaign for heritage preservation began to gather momentum in
society. It asserted itself primarily as a challenge against commercialism – or
against the government playing into the hands of the business sector – with
regard to four interrelated sets of issues: non-profit-making versus profit-driven
operation; public space versus privatized use; open process versus closed-door

37 The architects were Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, whose other works include the “bird’s nest”
Beijing National Stadium for the 2008 Olympic Games and London’s Tate Museum.
dealing; and historical value versus ahistorical/anti-historical development. The idea of non-commercialism as a parameter for developing the future uses of the site remained a cornerstone of the opposition throughout the struggle. Notwithstanding a common emphasis on culture, a fine line existed between the initial commercial approach by the government and the developer who sought to turn the place into a retail and entertainment complex, and the preservationist/cultural approaches advocated by the opposition camp that emphasized the historical value and artistic potential of the site.

The initial struggle resulted in some gestures of concession by the government; taking a step further, the CPS Heritage Taskforce – consisting of architects, preservationists and district councillors – launched a series of activities during the interim or “liminoid” period to move the movement forward from a general anti-commercial stance to confronting the issues of history, memory and lived space. The case study shows how the heritage and cultural value of the compound was defended and constructed through a host of discourses. These included a general discourse of heritage that affirmed the value of history as well as historical artifacts as an end itself. There were also a series of more site-specific discourses that exalted the architectural aesthetics and historical significance of the CPS compound.

Drawing on the notion of collective memory, this article reveals how history is constructed and remembered, on the one hand, through a hegemonic framework of the rule of law associated with the colonial government, and how this process took place, on the other hand, against other alternative, less-developed accounts that were associated with the people or that were more critical of colonial rule. The hegemonic framework of the rule of law in fact drew on a pre-existing narrative of Hong Kong’s progress and development, by which the campaign turned the historical site into an icon of collective identification for the city as a whole. This probably explained why the campaign turned out to be a moderate success on the front of anti-commercialism. Yet ironically, all these talks and discourses on history were pitched at a rather abstract level of symbolization, which perhaps fell short of “historizing” the history of colonial rule. The stories of the numerous individuals with direct experience of the early legal system remain a silent area. As Munn has rightly suggested, the starting point for a critical and extensive study of the history of the institutions of criminal justice should be “the varied experience of the hundreds of thousands of people who have appeared before the colony’s courts, and not the complacent myths about equal laws and impartial justice that have so seduced colonial historians.” Nevertheless, beyond the abstract level of symbolization of history, our study also reveals that the meaning of the site was re-created experientially through such activities as historical tours and exhibitions, which not only looked to the past for knowledge, perspectives and historical imagination, but also opened up new possibilities for the future uses of the site.

38 Munn, “The criminal trial,” p. 68.