

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

On higher grounds: Negotiating the legal
framework for conserving Lantau Mountain
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Abstract

Amid rapid urbanization and globalization, rural architectural heritage in Hong Kong faces mounting pressures from development and fragmented regulatory structures. This study investigates the architectural significance of the Lantau Mountain Camp, a site established by international, multi-denominational Protestant missionaries, and explores its role as a case study for heritage conservation in rural contexts. The camp exemplifies cultural exchange and offers insights into the intersection of local identities and global influences. Its unique lithic architectural character, which departs from traditional Chinese styles and urban standards, raises critical questions about representation, social justice, and the politics of heritagization. This article underscores the necessity for community involvement and the incorporation of local knowledge into legal frameworks to ensure inclusive conservation approaches that empower stakeholders. Drawing on international conservation frameworks, the study proposes a tailored conservation plan that gives equal attention to both recognized and non-statutory heritage sites. Engaging community advocacy groups and fostering public awareness are identified as key strategies for garnering broad-based support. Furthermore, the study highlights the essential role of public funding and heritage impact assessments in enhancing stakeholder understanding and long-term commitment. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of rural architectural heritage in Hong Kong and provide valuable lessons for comparable contexts worldwide. By advocating for collaborative, community-oriented approaches, the study calls for innovative conservation practices that honor historical significance while advancing sustainability and cultural diversity. Ultimately, the Lantau Mountain Camp serves as a compelling model for heritage conservation, reinforcing a renewed sense of community ownership and responsibility in safeguarding cultural heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Legal framework; Rural architecture; Rural globality; Built heritage; Cultural landscape; Architectural conservation

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1. Introduction

The architectural heritage of rural Hong Kong SAR, China, particularly the Lantau Mountain Camp, epitomizes a significant case of international cultural exchange and

conservation. Established by a diverse group of international and multi-denominational Protestant missionaries, this site transcends local contexts and engages with broader global discussions on heritage conservation and sustainability. At a time when rapid urbanization and globalization threaten many cultural landscapes, the preservation of such sites offers essential insights into the complex interplay between local identities and international influences. The Lantau Mountain Camp serves as a focal point for understanding how global actors and movements have shaped local cultural practices within a rapidly modernizing environment. Its significance extends beyond local concerns, as it embodies the challenges of resilience and vulnerability faced by communities navigating similar pressures worldwide.

1.1. Aim of the research

This article analyzes the architectural heritage of the Lantau Mountain Camp within the broader frameworks of international conservation policies and local heritage management. It seeks to explore the regulatory landscape governing the preservation of this significant site and the implications of these regulations for stakeholders involved in conservation. By examining these interrelated elements, the article aims to contribute to more effective heritage management practices that facilitate sustainable development and community engagement.

1.2. International aspect of the topic

The conservation of built heritage in Hong Kong transcends local concerns and reflects international discourses on heritage preservation and adaptive reuse that resonate across urban landscapes worldwide. As a site established by a diverse group of international missionaries, Lantau Mountain Camp exemplifies how global influences, such as missionary activities, have shaped local identities and practices within a rapidly modernizing context. It represents an early form of rural globality, or “rural places that become truly global” (Cid Aguayo, 2008, p.542), set against the backdrop of a swiftly modernizing Chinese city. The site thus serves as a focal point for examining how cultural preservation intersects with contemporary challenges posed by urbanization and policy. At the heart of this discussion is the Lantau Mountain Camp, a site of historical and cultural significance that occupies a unique position within the predominantly Chinese context of rural Hong Kong. Established over a century ago by international and multi-denominational Protestant missionaries, the camp served as a nexus of social progress, education, and community engagement. Its architecture reflects a blend of styles adapted to the mountainous environment, offering an instructive example of how cultural exchange and functional needs can shape architectural practices.

The camp represents not only the resilience of a traditional community but also illustrates how faith-based organizations have historically contributed to social welfare and local development. Preserving this site enriches our understanding of the global impact of missionary activity while promoting cultural exchange and appreciation for religious pluralism within the local context.

Throughout its colonial and post-colonial history, Hong Kong's conservation policies have evolved in response to shifting local political and social dynamics while also being shaped by global trends and international standards (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). The importance of understanding the legal framework surrounding the Lantau Mountain Camp cannot be overstated. A comprehensive examination of the legal requirements and protections in place is essential for ensuring effective heritage conservation, as these legalities dictate the rights, responsibilities, and resources available for preservation efforts. The conservation of the Lantau Mountain Camp intersects with several international conservation standards, including the Burra Charter, the China Principles, and the Venice Charter – key documents endorsed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) for the conservation and restoration of heritage buildings and sites. These standards aim to guide sustainable heritage conservation practices worldwide by safeguarding culturally significant sites and their contexts. Meanwhile, the interplay with local legal frameworks, such as the Hong Kong Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance, introduces complexity into the conservation landscape, as various regulatory bodies each uphold their own priorities and strategies.

1.3. Significance of examining the legal framework governing the Lantau Mountain Camp

Despite this rich interplay of influences, a cohesive local vision for heritage conservation remains lacking (Lee *et al.*, 2018). The fragmented regulatory framework – divided among multiple government bodies – further complicates planning and execution, leading to inefficiencies and increased costs for conservation initiatives. The architectural heritage of rural Hong Kong is particularly significant as it reflects a diverse cultural tapestry shaped over centuries. The region's built environment is a confluence of indigenous practices, colonial encounters, and modern influences, forming a unique identity that resonates with global discussions on cultural preservation in the face of globalization and homogenization. Each historical structure tells a story – encapsulating narratives of colonization and migration while emphasizing the cultural practices and social dynamics of the communities that inhabit them. Rural Hong Kong's architectural

heritage serves as both a reminder of the past and a guide for future sustainable practices, illustrating how traditional architectural techniques can inform contemporary design, environmental stewardship, and community cohesion (Guerrero Baca & Soria López, 2018). The insights derived from these structures extend far beyond Hong Kong, contributing to a global dialog on sustainable development, cultural diversity, and the need for inclusive conservation approaches that empower local voices.

Hong Kong's countryside – including designated country parks, their peripheries, sites of special scientific interest, and green belts – spans nearly three-fourths of the city's total land area. Within these relatively rural areas, in comparison to densely populated, highly developed urban zones, numerous villages, buildings, and landscapes epitomize the cultural and social significance of communities of Chinese ancestry and other cultural backgrounds. Although appreciation for these historical buildings is growing among enthusiasts and the general public – and efforts to preserve and repurpose them align with a rising focus on sustainable adaptability (Davies *et al.*, 2024) – many of these structures are privately owned. The convoluted navigation of the regulatory system and the burdens of legal compliance deter property owners from proactively protecting, renovating, or repurposing their heritage buildings to meet contemporary needs. As public and professional interest grows in long-neglected or abandoned historic buildings, conflicting values and priorities among various stakeholders, including property owners, developers, and conservationists, can lead to tensions and difficulties in cooperation, particularly in meeting statutory requirements.

At the heart of this discussion is the Lantau Mountain Camp, a site of historical and cultural significance that holds a unique position within the predominantly Chinese context of rural Hong Kong. Established over a century ago by international and multi-denominational Protestant missionaries, the camp served as a nexus of social progress, education, and community engagement. Its architecture reflects a blend and compromise of styles, adapted to the mountainous environment, and serves as a valuable example of how cultural exchanges and functionality can shape architectural practices. The camp represents not only the resilience of the traditional community but also illustrates how faith-based organizations have historically contributed to social welfare and local development. Preserving this site enriches our understanding of the global impact of missionary activities while promoting cultural exchange and appreciation for religious pluralism within the local context.

In a landscape where recreational pressures and environmental challenges pose significant risks to cultural

heritage, understanding these legalities is imperative for mobilizing action against potential threats and establishing robust protections. This examination also brings to light issues of cultural representation and social justice. The Lantau Mountain Camp's historical association with diverse religious groups raises critical questions about the rights of these communities in the conservation process. The involvement of various stakeholders – including owners and occupants, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations such as local universities – necessitates a nuanced understanding of the legal landscape to ensure that all voices are represented and respected in decision-making. Fostering such dialog is essential for community buy-in and empowering local populations to engage actively in heritage management efforts.

The relevance of architectural heritage in rural Hong Kong, particularly through the lens of the Lantau Mountain Camp, illustrates profound global themes in cultural identity, historical significance, and sustainable development. The case study of the Lantau Mountain Camp is significant for several reasons. It highlights the importance of preserving cultural identity in the face of urbanization and governmental regulations, offering insights into how historical and institutional narratives shape contemporary communities. By examining the legal framework that governs this site, the study provides a deeper understanding of how policies and regulations have converged over time in rural and protected areas of Hong Kong and their implications for community engagement and social dynamics today.

The preservation of such heritage sites is essential not only for maintaining historical continuity but also for fostering environmental sustainability and cultural diversity. The Lantau Mountain Camp exemplifies how traditional architectural practices can inform modern sustainable design approaches and community cohesion, thus serving as a model for adaptive reuse within conservation efforts. Finally, the topic encourages discussions about the tension and representation of various stakeholders involved in heritage management, emphasizing social justice and equitable practices in conservation. By addressing these multifaceted themes, this study contributes to broader conversations about cultural heritage on both local and international levels. It reinforces the need for inclusive and effective conservation strategies that honor the past while empowering communities to engage in their heritage management moving forward.

1.4. Outline of the article

The article is structured as follows:

- Section 1, "Introduction," provides an overview of the Lantau Mountain Camp, exploring its historical

context, architectural significance, international and local relevance, and the importance of the study.

- Section 2, “Methodology, limitations, and significance,” outlines the methodology, research phases, and challenges and limitations of the research, as well as the significance of the research findings.
- Section 3 delves into the legal requirements applied to the Lantau Mountain Camp across different phases of its development – namely, its origin and location; land and buildings; the formation of its self-management association; its designation within country park areas; and, in recent years, the absence of statutory recognition despite its historical and architectural significance.
- Section 4 concludes that the lack of cohesive laws and regulations governing the conservation of the Lantau Mountain Camp has led to significant challenges to preserving its historical significance. It advocates for community engagement, tailored guidelines, and adopting international best practices to facilitate effective heritage management and ensure sustainable preservation for future generations.

2. Methodology, limitations, and significance

2.1. Methodology

This article endeavors to delineate and elucidate the legal and regulatory framework governing the establishment and development of the Lantau Mountain Camp, placing significant emphasis on the statutory requirements that either facilitate or hinder the preservation of this invaluable cultural heritage. The investigation, conducted over a span of more than 3 years, employed a mixed-methods approach – integrating desktop research, archival investigations, fieldwork, stakeholder interviews, and site observations – to construct a comprehensive understanding of the camp’s historical narrative and the ongoing conservation efforts associated with it. A meticulous survey and analysis of the architectural styles, property conditions, and amenities of the approximately 20 stone chalets comprising the camp were conducted to assess their unique contributions to the region’s heritage. This extensive evaluation is intended to inform recommendations for a conservation management plan aimed at ensuring the sustainable development of the Lantau Mountain Camp.

2.2. Research phases

2.2.1. Chronological analysis

The research commenced with a chronological analysis of the site’s development, correlating significant legislative milestones and regulatory modifications with pivotal

historical events that have influenced the camp’s trajectory. This phase aimed to uncover and organize the origins and historical evolution of the Lantau Mountain Camp, thereby providing a robust foundation for contextualizing its significance within both local and global heritage frameworks.

During the research process, a distinctive archive of original documents was unearthed, including correspondence from members of missionary societies, diaries from campers, camp notes, notices, reports, meeting minutes, and government records dating from the 1920s to the 1980s. These materials furnish invaluable insights into the camp’s establishment, growth, and the evolving social dynamics that have shaped its history.

2.2.2. Survey and evaluation

A comprehensive survey of the Lantau Mountain Camp and its surrounding landscapes (Figure 1) was undertaken, meticulously documenting the current conditions of the approximately 20 existing structures and their geological and environmental contexts. Architectural drawings of some of the stone huts were produced. In addition, the detailed structural conditions of selected huts were recorded and evaluated (Figures 2 and 3).

2.2.3. Stakeholder engagement

To develop a holistic understanding of the Lantau Mountain Camp and its heritage, interviews were conducted with a diverse array of stakeholders to document their perspectives and experiences. Former campers who participated from the 1960s through the 1990s were engaged to elicit insights into the conditions of the stone huts and the management practices associated with their camping experiences. These interviews provided recollections of camp activities, maintenance practices, and the overarching environment of the camp during those decades, contributing vital historical context for comprehending the significance of these structures.

Furthermore, discussions with current cabin owners, including representatives from both societal and individual ownership, offered insights into the challenges



Figure 1. Lantau Mountain Camp in the autumnal silvergrass
Source: Photo by the author (2021)



Figure 2. Cabin #18 of the Lantau Mountain Camp belonging to the Baptist Church
Source: Photo by the author (2021)



Figure 3. Cabin #4 of the Lantau Mountain Camp belonging to the Basel Mission
Source: Photo by the author (2021)

of preserving the stone chalets today. These conversations addressed the structural sustainability of the huts and broader issues surrounding the conservation of the Lantau Mountain Camp and its environs, unveiling differing priorities, experiences, and strategies for maintenance and heritage conservation. Engagement with volunteers affiliated with the church groups that own the cabins was also integral, as it enabled exploration of how these societal owners facilitate community involvement in the upkeep of the huts and their amenities. The diversity of these interviews enriched a comprehensive understanding of the camp's historical significance, the ongoing challenges, and the prospects for its long-term preservation.

The research also incorporated site observations of the project team's activities, which focused on

architectural restoration and landscape conservation. These observations highlighted key strategies for engaging both owners and volunteers in the restoration process while also effectively managing the contributions of various contractors. However, navigating the complex interactions with multiple government departments, particularly those responsible for funding restoration initiatives, revealed crucial challenges. Notably, despite the camp's current lack of formal statutory heritage designation, both the project team and property owners encounter numerous legal requirements that complicate the restoration process. Compliance with building codes, environmental regulations, and local planning ordinances necessitates meticulous attention to detail and ongoing dialog with regulatory bodies. This experience emphasizes the importance of active collaboration among stakeholders and highlights the critical need for clear communication and effective project management to achieve conservation objectives efficiently.

2.2.4. Legal framework analysis

In discussions and reviews of the conservation and restoration of historic built structures, prevailing legislation, policies, and practices concerning the conservation of tangible heritage in relevant jurisdictions come into the spotlight. The present study includes an investigation of the local, national, and international legal frameworks that affect the conservation of the Lantau Mountain Camp. The legal framework for cultural heritage encompasses a diverse array of topics, including international conventions, national laws, and local regulations aimed at protecting cultural heritage. This regulatory system defines and demarcates what constitutes tangible heritage (e.g., monuments and buildings), establishes the framework for protecting the historically built structures, outlines statutory requirements in the conservation and restoration processes, sets forth professional and esthetic standards, prescribes responsibilities for national and local governments, and provides mechanisms for conflict resolution when heritage sites are endangered (Frowe & Matravers, 2019; Jagielska-Burduk, 2022). Understanding the legal framework for architectural conservation provides a benchmark of standards and requirements in the planning and work process. In addressing privately owned historic buildings, a thorough review of existing policies regarding their conservation can enhance funding opportunities and align with public expectations. Comparative studies of policies and laws related to heritage conservation across various jurisdictions reveal different governmental approaches to policy-making, regulations, and promotion of such heritage (Petrillo, 2019). Yet, these discussions are often confined to policy research and seldom engage practitioners

such as architects and designers at the operational level. Although architectural factors play a central role in decisions regarding heritage protection, a plethora of other elements – varied in significance, frequency, and impact – also influence this decision-making process, including architecture and design considerations, land planning issues, social dynamics, budgetary constraints, and real estate management (Gonçalves *et al.*, 2019). Ultimately, all these factors are governed by the laws and regulations of their respective jurisdictions. The details and analysis of the legal framework concerning the conservation of the Lantau Mountain Camp are further discussed in the next section.

In the context of Hong Kong SAR, China, it is not uncommon for professionals and stakeholders to find themselves embroiled in conservation disputes or to overlook legal requirements out of ignorance or difficulty navigating the system (Mualam & Alterman, 2018). The laws governing built heritage conservation often exist across various governmental sectors – spanning building, culture, environment, planning, and fire services – creating an overly complex system that can be challenging to manage and easy to overlook. This complexity underscores critiques of heritage impact assessments and calls for improved frameworks that incorporate legal perspectives to enhance the effectiveness and reliability of assessing heritage impacts. Such integration will improve alignment between conservation efforts and legal mandates (Patiwael *et al.*, 2019).

For architectural researchers, the legal frameworks that have shaped the development of culturally and historically significant built structures over the years are often neglected. This omission highlights the necessity for a more integrated approach to heritage conservation that acknowledges and reinforces the role of legal frameworks alongside esthetic assessments, design considerations, community engagement, and economic factors (Harrison *et al.*, 2020). The conservation process of the Lantau Mountain Camp illustrates that the esthetic style, usage, and conservation value of architectural heritage are not solely at the discretion of architects, owners, and occupants; rather, they manifest as a complex aggregation of compromises formed through legal considerations, community input, and urban development strategies. This observation emphasizes the necessity for stakeholders to engage in a holistic discourse that incorporates diverse perspectives and legal frameworks in the conservation discussion.

2.3. Challenges and limitations

The current research is not without its limitations. The reliance on historical documents presents challenges

due to gaps in the archival record, which could obscure certain aspects of the camp's history and the socio-political contexts influencing its development. The subjective nature of stakeholder interviews, while rich in detail, may fail to encompass the entirety of the camp's historical narrative or the diverse perspectives of all involved parties. Geographic limitations in accessing certain groups of stakeholders further restrict the breadth of information gathered. The absence of a statutory heritage designation for the Lantau Mountain Camp complicates the research further, potentially limiting the scope of legal protections and underscoring challenges in formulating effective conservation strategies.

Despite these limitations, this multifaceted approach reveals the intricate interplay between legal frameworks and the practical realities of conserving the Lantau Mountain Camp. It highlights how this seemingly secluded rural architectural cluster embodies global perspectives and complexities of rurality in Hong Kong. Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural heritage preservation within both regional and international contexts of architectural conservation practices.

In a broader context, this article, with a particular focus on the legal framework of the development and conservation of the Lantau Mountain Camp, can serve as a crucial guideline for similar built heritage sites, particularly in three interconnected areas: Sites embodying mixed cultural contexts, architectural sites located within natural protected areas, and sites of significant cultural and social value without formal legal protection.

2.4. Significance of this study

The preservation of the Lantau Mountain Camp illustrates the complexities of managing heritage sites that represent diverse cultural narratives. In regions characterized by multiple cultural influences, for instance, vernacular, colonial, and contemporary practices, this article underscores the necessity of a nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics and stakeholder engagement. By providing a framework for identifying and integrating various cultural perspectives, this research emphasizes the importance of inclusivity in the heritage conservation process. Consequently, it offers a replicable model for sites embodying a spectrum of cultural histories, promoting a holistic approach that respects and honors the multifaceted identities of communities.

The research illuminates challenges and opportunities presented by the intersection of architectural heritage and environmental conservation, particularly at sites situated within natural protected areas. By articulating the need for

an integrated management framework that harmonizes the preservation of built heritage with the protection of natural landscapes, this article provides a reference for other sites in sensitive ecological contexts. Such experiences are essential for balancing development pressures with the imperative to maintain the integrity of both cultural and natural heritage, ensuring sustainable practices in the stewardship of these assets.

Moreover, the case of the Lantau Mountain Camp is particularly relevant for sites that, despite their intrinsic cultural and social significance, do not enjoy formal legal protection. This research highlights the vulnerabilities faced by such sites and the imperative to develop innovative conservation strategies that leverage community involvement, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive reuse practices. By detailing the complexities encountered in the absence of legal status, the article serves as a guide for other heritage sites navigating similar challenges. It advocates for proactive measures that can be undertaken by property owners, community groups, and conservationists to safeguard cultural heritage, thus fostering resilience and ensuring that significant sites are preserved for future generations.

This article enriches the discourse on the conservation of the Lantau Mountain Camp while providing practical insights and strategies applicable to a wide array of built heritage sites facing analogous cultural, environmental, and regulatory challenges. Through its comprehensive analysis, it contributes to the broader field of heritage conservation by offering actionable guidelines for the preservation of cultural and historical significance, regardless of legal status or environmental context.

3. Legal footprints in the shaping of Lantau Mountain Camp

3.1. The origin of Lantau Mountain Camp

Since the London Missionary Society posted Robert Morrison to China in 1807 (Daily, 2013), by the early 20th century, there were at least 50 protestant missionary operations in Hong Kong and Guangdong alone, a century after the first evangelical foothold was planted. These included schools, tertiary institutes, medical schools, hospitals, clinics, orphanages, and other institutions operated by missionary societies and locally established churches. During that period, missionaries from Western countries typically served together as family units for 5-year terms in the East. At the conclusion of the 5-year term, these mission families would take a break for several months in their home country to reconnect with old friends and travel to share their experiences and results from their spiritual efforts in Asia. After the furlough,

they would return to the same or a nearby location to start another undertaking. Those were the times when traveling abroad was a luxury; international transportation was costly and cumbersome. On top of that, the heat, humidity, and accompanying pestilence of the tropics took a heavy toll on the health of these missionary families and their secular counterparts. There was a necessity to return to cooler climates in order to recover from “tropical fatigue,” which is a medical term used to describe a variety of tropical illnesses, including malaria, yellow fever, typhus, gastrointestinal disorders, typhoid, cholera, dysentery, and the lingering health issues caused by prolonged and extreme heat and humidity (Crossette, 1998). Seeking refuge from the oppressive summer heat in a cooler environment was also seen as advantageous for children’s health, as they were more susceptible to various tropical illnesses. For adults, a break away from the daily toil of ministry, from the stress of culture shock, and being a social and spiritual role model as the only foreigners in the town became frightfully precious.

The makeshift summer retreat on Luofushan (or Mount Luofu) near Huizhou, Guangdong, could be regarded as the prototype of the Lantau Mountain Camp. In 1907, as many as 120 overseas missionaries of various denominations and nationalities posted in South China began to gather at Luofushan for the summer. They constructed huts using bamboo and palm leaves, which would be burned down at the end of the season to deter bandits from taking over. Cooking was done in several communal kitchen huts, each serving dishes that reflected the culinary preferences of England, Germany, North America, and other regions. Nearby, there were streams available for drinking water and swimming. (Kennedy-Skipton, 1962; Morgan, 1979; Unknown Author, 1940).

The concept of creating a summer camp on a hilltop in the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong gained traction when missionaries in South China could no longer hold their usual summer retreat at Luofushan due to political unrest. In 1922, the provincial governor of Guangdong informed the camp committee that he could no longer guarantee protection from bandits and thieves. A dedicated committee made persistent efforts to resume the summer camp as quickly as possible in a more secure location. Starting in the autumn of 1923, reconnaissance, negotiations with the Hong Kong government, and requests for funding from various mission societies were carried out promptly and diligently. Within 2 years, a lively summer camp featuring 20 rugged stone chalets for South China missions and their families was established atop a remote mountain on Lantau at an elevation of nearly 3,000 ft above sea level.

From its inception until the late 1980s, these stone cabins at the mountain campsite were owned by missions or their affiliated missionary societies and churches and primarily used during July and August. Campers relished the cool, breezy, and sometimes misty climate while the lowlands suffered from oppressive summer heat. Since the camp's foundation and continuing to this day, as it celebrates its centennial anniversary, there have been no shops or villages in the vicinity. Campers are required to arrange for their own supplies to bring to their cabins. Nonetheless, it has provided a true escape where children can roam freely, adults reconnect with old friends after a year of service at their respective posts, and everyone can enjoy the natural beauty and tranquility.

3.2. Land and buildings

At present, government land in Hong Kong SAR, China, designated for private residential, commercial, or industrial development, is typically sold through public auctions. In certain justified situations, it may also be granted through private treaty for specific uses that align with approved government policies and address the economic, social, and community needs of Hong Kong. This process is subject to rigorous policy review and must be deemed justifiable in the public interest. Way back nearly a century ago, land acquisition and building permits for the Lantau Mountain Camp followed a similar process. It was facilitated and supervised by Mr. Walter Schofield (1888 – 1968), District Officer of Southern District, who had regular correspondences with the representatives of the prospective campers at that time. Land parcels on Sunset Peak were considered New Grant Lots, which were to be sold at public auction subject to the satisfaction of standard sets of General Conditions and Special Conditions of Sale. In particular, GN365, published on April 25, 1906, was the first set of General Conditions of Sale. Land lot boundary, building standards, general maintenance, and hygiene of the auctioned land lots were encompassed by such conditions, hence defining the architectural prototype of the Lantau Mountain Camp's unusual lithic style and layout.

Among the General Conditions of Sale for the “Lantau Island Lot,” as cited in the *Notification of the Sales of Sunset Peak Land Lots*, the following provisions from GN365 were particularly relevant to building standards and landscape maintenance:

- (i) The purchaser of each land lot should “build and finish, fit for occupation... in a good, substantial and workmanlike manner” within 24 months upon the day of sale;
- (ii) Each purchased land lot should have “one or more good and permanent messuage or tenement upon

some part of such lot with walls of stone or brick and line-mortar and roof tiles or such other materials as may be approved by... and to the satisfaction of the District Officer”;

- (iii) (The messuage or tenement) “shall expand thereon in rateable improvements not less than the amount specified in the Particulars and Conditions of sale”;
- (iv) “No sewage or refuse water will be allowed to flow from the lot onto any of the adjoining lands whether belonging to the Crown or to private persons; neither shall any decaying, noisome, noxious, excrementitious, or other refuse matter to be deposited on any portion of any lot... The purchaser of each lot shall see that all refuse matters are properly removed daily from off the premises”; and,
- (v) (Neither shall) “any works of excavation on any Lot... no excavated earth shall be deposited on such a lot or on Crown Land adjoining in such manner as shall expose the slopes of such excavated earth to be eroded and washed down by the rains.”

Not mentioned in the general conditions were some highly specific dimensions and layout of the permanent stone cabins to be built on the saddle of the two lofty mountains conveyed by the district officer. Such conditions on minimum flat size concerning land sales were not novel, and they are still being enforced today. In the 1920s, the government typically mandated that when purchasing land, a building must be constructed valued at 50 cents/sq ft of the area bought. Since the structures on the mountain were intended to be simple, the initial proposal by the prospective Campers urged the District Office to have the authority to reduce this valuation, enabling a stone hut measuring 10 ft × 10 ft to be built on a site of 50 ft × 50 ft, effectively allowing it to occupy twice the usual size. However, other officials in the department did not immediately support this proposal regarding the valuation, the number of rooms, or the height of the proposed 10 ft × 10 ft × 8 ft stone hut with a concrete roof. The initial design was criticized by the same Mr. Schofield, who regarded the camper's application as “not... desirable for human habitation; the minimum height of any room should be 10 ft, and no house should have less than two rooms,” and that he “(did) not wish to take responsibility of allowing the erection of one-room houses without Government authority.”

Subsequent correspondences between prospective campers and the district office showed that these general conditions were not non-negotiable. The campers further clarified the purposes and limitations of the proposed summer camp dwelling houses, citing significantly higher construction costs (3 times more than in lowland areas), the

effects of altitude, harsher and cooler weather conditions, and the fact that these accommodations would only be used during the summer months. Given these circumstances, they argued that the requirements the government might impose on builders in lower areas should not be applied to the camp. Consequently, it was decided that the building covenant for the land lots at Sunset Peak would be set at 10 cents/sq ft, with a minimum of HK\$300 and no additional restrictions on building types. These terms were welcomed by the involved missionary societies, and the auction of the land lots was scheduled for Christmas Eve in 1924 (Figure 4).

At one point, some of the potential campers proposed the idea of designating the area between Sunset Peak and Yi Tung Shan as a foreign reserve. However, the district office promptly dismissed this suggestion, stating that “the government would not act on this matter” (Mitchell, 1924a) out of concern that such a designation could provoke protests from the Chinese population. They noted that there was little need for such a designation since no Chinese individuals were currently trying to encroach on the camp area. Looking back, this decision reflects several recent writings suggesting that racially discriminatory zoning in Colonial Hong Kong may have been driven by economic protectionism.

3.3. Changing landscapes

To facilitate coordination among cabin owners for the management and upkeep of the collectively-owned Lantau Mountain Camp (Figure 5), an association was established from the camp's inception. The earliest reference to this organization appeared in a letter from Dr. Isaiah Edward Mitchell (1869 – 1935) to prospective camp owners in December 1924, where he addressed the correspondence to “the following members of the Laan Tau Campers Association” (Mitchell, 1924b). In 1961, the association opted to rename itself “The Lantau Mountain Camp Residents Association” and drafted a constitution in accordance with the Companies Ordinance of Hong Kong. This constitution outlined the objectives of the association. It defines the values and aspirations of the camp as a community of people, recounts the communal properties of the camp, delineates the responsibilities of campers on the upkeep of the communal facilities and to consistently fund the costs of such, and maintain the integrity of the community for future cabin owners (Lantau Mountain Camp Residents Association, 1961).

Until the late 1960s, the cabin owners and their representatives were primarily missionaries, including clergy, teachers, and doctors. Over time, the Lantau Mountain Camp Residents Association saw a growing

number of members who were practicing Christians in various professional roles, such as educators, architects, public works officials, observatory staff, and those in forestry and other fields. With missionary societies shifting their focus from Hong Kong to less privileged areas of Asia from the 1970s onwards, some of the properties on Lantau Mountain Camp were sold to individuals with or without connections to the missionaries or were transferred to local church organizations that they had set up. Despite the growing secular nature of cabin ownership, a shared sense of fellowship rooted in a love for nature and tranquility endures. Cabin owners and their guests have maintained the infrastructure and lifestyle of a charming hamlet for a century, away from the hurly-burly of the city, even amidst the modernization and changes in society.

Alongside this change was the introduction of the Country Park Ordinance in Hong Kong. Set in unsurpassed natural scenery, Lantau Mountain Camp's pristine environs were designated as country parks in 1978 – Lantau South Country Park to the southern side of the camp and Lantau North Country Park to the north. Lantau South Country Park remains the largest of all country parks in Hong Kong (Figure 6).

Country Park Ordinance Cap. 208 is the basis for designating over half of Hong Kong's land areas as country parks and special areas. It provides the principles and jurisdiction to such designation, controls and manages the land and resources within, decides on various purposes of activities allowed within, and establishes the Country and Marine Parks Board to oversee all related matters. Prior to the designation of any country parks, the Cap. 208 provides that draft maps be prepared “to the extent that it is practicable, show or make provision for such facilities and services as the authority considers appropriate for the country park... in conjunction with any draft map prepared under subsection (1), prepare explanatory material relating to the map, which may be in the form of diagrams, illustrations, notes or descriptive matter; and any such explanatory material shall be part of the map” (Country Parks Ordinance, 1976) in order to set unequivocal land boundaries to all landowners who may be affected and for inspection for any further developments in the vicinity.

To advance the circumscription lands in Hong Kong for nature conservation, the Country Park Ordinance allows the government when “of the opinion that any use or proposed use of any leased land by the occupier within a country park would substantially reduce the enjoyment and amenities of the country park as such,” to “request the appropriate land authority to exercise the powers conferred by this section” to control the use of land. Such powers include, by notice in writing, requiring



LAND OFFICE.

No. 570.—It is hereby notified (1) that Government Notifications Nos. 365 of 1906, 294 of 1924, 697 of 1909, 278 of 1911, S. 114 of 1918, S. 261 of 1921 and S. 139 of 1924 are hereby revoked and (2) that until further notice there shall be deemed to be incorporated in the published Particulars and Conditions of all sales of Crown Land in the New Territories (exclusive of that portion described as "Southern District Mainland" in the Order in Council dated the 15th March, 1906, Government Notification No. 212 of 1906) (a) the following General Conditions of Sale (unless otherwise stated), and (b) such of the following Special Conditions as are therein referred to by their respective numbers.

F. EAVES,
Land Officer.

7th October, 1924.

GENERAL CONDITIONS OF SALE.

1. The highest bidder above the upset price shall be the Purchaser, and if any dispute arise between two or more bidders for any lot, such lot shall be put up again at a former bidding.

2. No person shall at any bidding advance less than one dollar or such other sum as shall be named at the time of sale.

3. Immediately after the fall of the hammer, the purchaser of the lot shall sign a Memorandum of Agreement in the form hereinafter contained, for completing the purchase in accordance with the general and special conditions of sale and shall, within three days of the day of sale, pay to the District Officer, for and on behalf of His Majesty the King, the full amount of Premium at which the lot shall have been purchased.

4. The Purchaser of each lot, shall, when required by the District Officer have boundary stones of a size and pattern approved by him and marked with the Registry Number placed at each angle of the lot.

5. The Purchaser of each lot shall where such lot is sold as a building lot, build and finish, fit for occupation, before the expiration of twenty-four calendar months from the day of sale, in a good, substantial and workmanlike manner, one or more good and permanent messuage or tenement upon some part of such lot with walls of stone or brick and lime-mortar and roof of tiles or such other materials as may be approved by the District Officer, and in all other respects to the satisfaction of the District Officer and shall expend thereon in rateable improvements not less than the amount specified in the Particulars and Conditions of sale. Provided that notwithstanding any default by the purchaser in complying with this condition as regards any lot, and notwithstanding any acceptance on behalf of the Crown of any Crown rent or rates or other payment whatever, the District Officer may in his discretion, and whether the purchaser consent or not, fix at any time and from time to time any extended period for the completion of any of the said buildings in substitution for the said period of 24 months, and thereupon the obligation hereunder of the purchaser to complete the said building shall be taken to refer to such substituted period, and the right of re-entry reserved in these conditions shall arise upon default of completion within such substituted period as if it had been the period originally provided.

6. No sewage or refuse water will be allowed to flow from the Lot on to any of the adjoining lands whether belonging to the Crown or to private persons; neither shall any decaying, noisome, noxious, excrementitious, or other refuse matter be deposited on any portion of any Lot, and in carrying out any works of excavation on any Lot no excavated earth shall be deposited on such lot or on Crown Land adjoining in such manner as shall expose the slopes of such excavated earth to be eroded and washed down by the rains. The Purchaser of each lot shall see that all refuse matters are properly removed daily from off the premises.

Figure 4. Notification of the Sales of Sunset Peak Land Lots, October 7, 1924

Source: Reprint by Laan Tau Mountain Camp Collection, Old China Hands Archives, California State University, Northridge

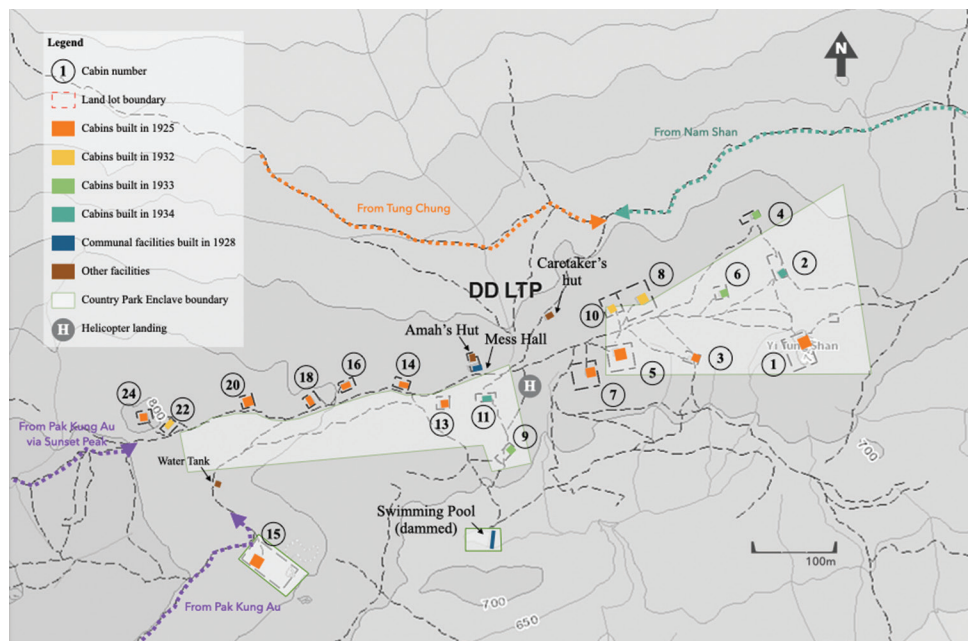


Figure 5. Layout of the Lantau Mountain Camp indicating cabins, amenities, and footpaths to the site. The numbers 1 to 24 represent the cabin numbers at Lantau Mountain Camp
Source: Map by the author



Figure 6. A lookout near Lantau Mountain Camp set up by the agriculture, fisheries and conservation department
Source: Photo by the author (2023)

the occupier within not being less than 3 months, as the Land Authority may determine, to discontinue or modify the use (Cap. 208 Section 16.2 [a]), or prohibiting the occupier from proceeding with the proposed use or, also within such period, not being less than 3 months, as the Land Authority may determine, requiring the occupier to modify the proposed use (Cap. 208 Section 16.2 [b]). Failure of the occupier of the land concerned to do so would result in being guilty of an offense and shall be liable to a fine at level 2 and, in addition, to a fine of \$100 for each day during which the offense has continued (Amended L.N. 378 of 1989; E.R. 1 of 2022; Cap. 208 Section 16.4). The owner of land located within or impacted by a country

park will not receive any compensation. Furthermore, no legal action, claims, or proceedings may be initiated against the government or any other individual to seek damages, compensation, or costs for any damage, disturbance, loss, or reduction in the value of the land, personal disturbance, or inconvenience, restriction or prevention of rights, and other costs of effecting or complying with country park requirements (Cap. 208 Section 18).

In light of the designation of Lantau South Country Park and Lantau North Country Park, Lantau Mountain Camp was circumscribed entirely within country park areas. The campsite's private land lots and the properties on them became two separate enclaves on both sides of the saddle known as the "Yi Tung Shan enclave." The major footpath that traversed through Lantau Mountain Camp from Mui Wo to Sunset Peak blazed and maintained by campers, became part of the publicly accessible Lantau Trail Stage 2. Cabin owners have mixed emotions about this change and the growing number of outsiders visiting or passing through Lantau Mountain Camp. While they acknowledge everyone's right to come to the campsite to enjoy nature and hike the trails that have been maintained by the campers at their own expense for many years, they feel that visitors do not show enough appreciation for the campers' efforts in maintaining the area or for the camp's unique history. In addition, they are disappointed by the lack of efforts from the government to educate the public about the historical and architectural significance of the site. Resources and publicity tend to highlight nothing

more than the natural scenery of the Sunset Peak area, attracting many local and international trippers to Lantau Mountain Camp who are oblivious, if not insensitive, to the cultural value and the frailty of the historically built structures there. Damages of all sorts, such as break-ins, burglary, picnicking on rooftops, camping and loitering at the door of the cabins, and vandalism, are common. Campers generally feel a strong need to raise awareness among hikers and visitors to the country park about the necessity of staying away from the cabins, as they are still occupied and not abandoned. In addition, there is a widespread lack of understanding regarding the camp's history, along with a lack of appreciation for the campers' efforts in maintaining the area.

In fact, by designating a land area as a country park, the authority assumes a legal obligation to protect and maintain buildings and sites that hold historic or cultural significance within the country parks and special areas while still adhering to the provisions of the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance (Cap. 53; Cap. 208 Section 4.a.iii.). Yet, as of today, the historical and cultural value of the Lantau Mountain Camp has not been assessed or researched by the antiquities and monuments office (AMO) or agriculture, fisheries and conservation department – an apparent omission from the territory-wide assessment of over a thousand historic buildings completed in 2023 commissioned by the (Antiquities Advisory Board, 2024), despite a recent study points out that there is “no evidence of nationalistic bias against British or Japanese built military heritage buildings and structures after the handover of Hong Kong to China... or bias in favor of imperial Chinese architecture in the post-colonial period” (Chau *et al.*, 2022). Unless the building concerned is declared a monument, there is no law or regulation in Hong Kong to stop its demolition or abandonment if the property owner opts to do so.

In the 2018 policy address, the government announced the establishment of a HK\$1 billion Lantau Conservation Fund (LCF) to promote the conservation of Lantau and to pursue minor local improvement works in villages and communities in support of conservation initiatives. Out of this HK\$1 billion sum, half of the amount is earmarked to offer financial assistance to eligible non-governmental organizations, charities, and universities, allowing them to partner with local communities and landowners to implement conservation and related projects in Lantau. This policy and the fund (LCF) that was hence set up are means to supplement existing regulatory mechanisms to protect and conserve privately owned historic built structures within the rural or countryside areas of Hong Kong's largest island. Prior to the establishment of LCF,

in the 2017 policy address, the countryside conservation office was established under the Environmental Protection Department (transferred to the Environment Branch of the Environment and Ecology Bureau in 2023) for similar purposes for village environments and their built heritages in the New Territories, except Lantau. These funds and the mechanisms to award and manage projects related to built heritage are sometimes perceived as an enhancement of the transfer development right approach that has been deployed by the Hong Kong government since 2007 (Chan & Hou, 2015).

In 2021, the Lantau Mountain Camp Residents Association reached out to the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) on the feasibility of submitting a conservation management plan to LCF for the evaluation of the cultural and historical value of the Lantau Mountain Camp and long-term protection of the site. They submitted a proposal to LCF in April 2022, which was approved by the LCF Advisory Committee in December 2022. A 3-year conservation management agreement project on the study and protection of the Lantau Mountain Camp and its surrounding environs commenced in January 2023. The project highlights the architectural restoration of the Caretaker's Hut, which has been disused for over 30 years, and its adaptive use as a “ranger and researcher station” upon the completion of restoration works (Figure 7).

As with any new building works and/or alterations and additions to existing buildings, architectural restoration works of the historical Caretaker's Hut also have to follow the standards and requirements set out in the Building Ordinance (Cap. 123). In particular, the Building Ordinance requires that any such work should be overseen



Figure 7. Façade of the Caretaker's Hut of Lantau Mountain Camp before restoration

Source: Photo by the author (2021)

by authorized persons and registered professionals such as registered structural engineers and registered geotechnical engineers with proper engagement procedures. The normal procedure for restoration works of a historical building will be to submit the application with standard forms of new building works and/or alterations and additions works to the Buildings Department, which will then circulate the documents concerning various aspects of the works to as many as nine other government departments concerned including Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, Fire Services Department, Lands Department and so on. The Buildings Department, however, may decline any application that it deems not within its jurisdiction. In the case of the restoration works for the Caretaker's Hut, the Buildings Department refused to handle the application, necessitating the CUHK project team to hire an authorized person to oversee the vetting, incurring additional time and costs.

At the same time, several extra-contractual conditions were imposed on the architectural restoration works by LCF, one of them being the formulation of a conservation management plan focused on cultural landscape conservation for the proposed restoration works for approval by the LCF Advisory Committee before commencement of any restoration works can be carried out. In general practice and by statutory requirement, a conservation proposal or conservation management plan is only required for projects involving large-scale conversion works/alteration works/addition works/demolition works within historic buildings/sites in the "heritage sites" list defined by the AMO (Development Bureau, 2009). The Lantau Mountain Camp (including all its built structures) is currently not a "heritage site" defined by AMO and is not required by AMO for a heritage impact assessment. The additional condition will further increase the project costs. As of now, the project team is addressing both statutory submissions for the restoration works and the conservation management plan, with completion of the restoration expected to be delayed by at least 9 months.

The chronological development of the Lantau Mountain Camp reflects a rich interweaving of diverse cultural contexts, with its origins rooted in a mix of missionary work and community-building efforts. This architectural site, nestled within the breathtaking natural landscapes of Lantau South and North Country Parks, serves as a poignant reminder of the delicate interplay between human habitation and environmental preservation. Despite its significant cultural and social value – embodying a century-long legacy of fellowship, resilience, and dedication to nature – the camp remains in a precarious position, lacking

formal legal protection and a coherent set of requirements for its historical structures. The ongoing conservation efforts signal a hopeful path forward yet underscore the pressing need for recognizing and safeguarding such heritage sites, ensuring that the Lantau Mountain Camp continues to inspire future generations while respecting its storied past. As it stands at the intersection of cultural importance and ecological stewardship, the camp embodies the challenges and opportunities of preserving a vital piece of Hong Kong's historical landscape amidst the shifting dynamics of society and governance.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of Lantau Mountain Camp's legal framework provides critical insights that extend beyond its immediate context, offering a replicable model for heritage conservation in other post-colonial settings, particularly in Southeast Asian cities facing analogous challenges. The study highlights a recurring issue: The absence of coherent laws and regulations governing the conservation of built heritage often results in significant historical structures being rendered illegitimate under contemporary legal standards. This scenario is not unique to Hong Kong; many Southeast Asian cities similarly navigate complex heritage landscapes shaped by historical legacies and evolving regulatory frameworks. This deters many property owners from maintaining their buildings of historical and cultural value, leaving them dilapidated and ruinous. At the same time, local and vernacular values are seldom translated into the statutory process or decision-making that defines heritage assets.

Incorporating local knowledge, narratives, and holistic perspectives into the legal framework is essential for effective architectural heritage conservation (Jenkins, 2018). To establish a viable conservation mechanism, it is crucial to forge meaningful partnerships between property owners and conservation experts, alongside collaborative efforts from emerging communities committed to the ongoing maintenance and adaptive reuse of heritage sites. Looking ahead, examining the regulations and policies of other countries, such as the United Kingdom and Singapore, can provide valuable insights for informing conservation initiatives at the Lantau Mountain Camp. Developing tailored local guidelines prioritizing the protection of both recognized and non-statutory heritage buildings would greatly benefit the camp. For instance, inspired by the Local Heritage List established by Historic England, creating a local heritage register in Lantau could effectively identify and safeguard significant structures, even without formal designation. The case of Lantau Mountain Camp serves as a compelling example of how empowering local stakeholders through education, resources, and a sense of

ownership fosters effective conservation strategies. This collaborative approach is particularly pertinent in post-colonial contexts, where integrating local knowledge, cultural narratives, and community values into heritage management processes is paramount. Furthermore, Singapore's adaptive reuse policies exemplify how simplified frameworks can support the conservation of both recognized and non-statutory heritage assets, a model that could similarly benefit other Southeast Asian cities facing heritage conservation challenges.

Engaging community advocacy groups in raising awareness about the camp's historical significance is important for fostering public support and participation in conservation efforts. However, it is crucial to enable and provide resources to the owners of the stone cabins, ensuring they have the necessary support and incentives to actively engage in conservation initiatives. This approach is far more effective than having outsiders dictate actions without offering resources, as it empowers owners to take ownership of the conservation process. Furthermore, given the remoteness and inaccessibility of the Lantau Mountain Camp – situated within a country park without any vehicular access – any development is virtually impossible, making it all the more essential to focus on preserving the existing heritage through community-led initiatives and supported stewardship. To facilitate these conservation efforts, public funding will be required, which can only be secured through statutory recognition of the site's heritage significance. Implementing heritage impact assessments for any future proposals can ensure that stakeholders carefully consider the significance of the camp's architectural attributes, reinforcing the need for formal recognition to support and protect this valuable site effectively.

In Singapore, while there is no specific legislation or policy exclusively focused on the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings lacking statutory recognition, several existing frameworks and guidelines support these practices. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has developed conservation guidelines that address the conservation and adaptive reuse of buildings that, although not formally designated, are acknowledged for their historical or architectural value within various conservation areas. In addition, the URA provides technical guidelines and standards to assist property owners and professionals in the restoration of their buildings. Publications related to conservation are also produced to enhance private owners' understanding of conservation principles and guidelines. These guidelines underscore the importance of community engagement and the preservation of the buildings' character throughout the adaptive reuse process.

Such frameworks are directly relevant to the adaptive reuse of the Caretaker's Hut at Lantau Mountain Camp, which is currently being transformed into a rest stop for researchers studying the ecological and geographical significance of the Sunset Peak area. The insights gained from this adaptive reuse initiative can provide a valuable model for managing privately built heritage both in Hong Kong and in other post-colonial contexts facing similar challenges. This case illustrates how community involvement and innovative repurposing can support sustainable conservation practices while respecting and preserving historical significance.

As the Lantau Mountain Camp develops tailored local guidelines and engages community advocacy groups, it offers a blueprint for other cities facing similar heritage dilemmas. The insights gained from the camp's experience – particularly its community-centered model of conservation – can inform and inspire heritage management in other post-colonial contexts, enhancing the specificities of local governance while respecting historical significance. Ultimately, by fostering collaborative partnerships, integrating local narratives, and creating adaptable frameworks for heritage conservation, the Lantau Mountain Camp can serve as a pioneering example of effective heritage stewardship that has significant implications for preserving cultural identity across Southeast Asia and beyond.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

For this study, formal ethical approval was not required as the research primarily involved retrospective analysis of publicly available data and non-sensitive, low-risk interviews with participants who were not considered vulnerable. Nevertheless, in adherence to ethical best

practices, informed consent was obtained from all interviewees prior to their participation, ensuring their voluntary involvement, understanding of the research purpose, and assurance of anonymity and confidentiality.

Consent for publication

Consent was obtained from all interviewees prior to their participation in the study.

Availability of data

Some of the original articles can be obtained from the Special Collections & Archives, University Library, California State University, Northridge.

Further disclosure

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