

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reinterpreting Chinese vernacular architecture
through actor-network: Creating heritage in
Hong Kong's northern New TerritoriesClarence Yuen*

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Abstract

Heritage is often described as treasures inherited by a society. However, in the transformation of a traditional settlement, the interpretation of heritage can vary from one extreme to another. In this study, I examine the interpretation of Hong Kong heritage and how the establishment of the heritage trail in the villages reflected the identity issues associated with the traditional buildings envisaged by the indigenous inhabitants and the Hong Kong government. The indigenous inhabitants in the New Territories of Hong Kong maintain and restore their traditional architecture to reinforce their lineage identity and affirm their recognition by the state authorities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the interpretation of heritage differs among agnates in the indigenous villages in the same cluster established by the same lineage. Using the establishment and continuous development of the last heritage trail in the New Territories as an example, I examine how lineage members manipulated their interpretation of heritage to enhance their social status *vis-à-vis* the Hong Kong government and what significance this had for the development of Hong Kong heritage in the post-1997 period. The symbolism and identity issues associated with architecture are further explored through the acting roles of buildings, government officials, and local elites, whose relationships were interwoven in an actor-network in the local society.

Keywords: Hong Kong; Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail; Ancestral hall; Study hall; Indigenous inhabitants

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1. Introduction

In this study, I demonstrate that, in establishing heritage trails by the Hong Kong government, the concept of heritage is manipulated by the indigenous inhabitants to enhance their status *vis-à-vis* modern development projects. Using ethnographic data from the New Territories, I aim to explore whether Hong Kong heritage promotion and heritage preservation policies have been designed in favor of village elites who have the legitimate power to interpret the meaning of heritage. Under the present political climate, are some village elites *de facto* seeking to manipulate the meaning of heritage through controlling a network of relationships as actors in the local society? In addition, I

evaluate the roles indigenous inhabitants play as they argue or cooperate with the government over the interpretation of cultural heritage.

This ethnographic study of a heritage trail began in 1997 when I first visited Lung Yeuk Tau (“the place where the dragon leaps”)¹ in the Fanling sub-district of the New Territories on a heritage tour as a tourist. What struck me most was the term “Ng Wai Luk Tsuen” (Five walled and six unwall; *Wuweiliucun*, 五围六村) used to describe the area inhabited by the Tang lineage in Lung Yeuk Tau *Heung* (alliance). In March 1997, I read in the newspaper that the Hong Kong government’s Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) would be organizing a basin meal feast (traditional Chinese cuisine) in Lung Yeuk Tau for “Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Day.” In local terms, a basin meal is called “*Poon Choi*” (cuisine in a basin). According to the description of a shopkeeper in Lung Yeuk Tau serving such a cuisine, it originated from food prepared by villagers for Emperor Qing Long (1711 – 1799) and his people heading south across China (Watson, 2004). On the day of the event, March 3, 1997, after a brief introduction by the AMO staff, we were taken by coach to Kun Lung Wai, a walled village owned by the Ng Wai Luk Tsuen, where the banquet was held. On this occasion, I was told that the ancestral hall, walled villages, and gate towers were places where we could remember the past, as these perspectives were commonplace for tourists who were contingent and emerged from the official discourse on “heritage.” The AMO gave each visitor a well-designed brochure *The Heritage of Lung Yeuk Tau* (Figure 1), which described the relics that were considered heritage by the AMO, disseminating the official heritage narratives. Since then, the concept of heritage has held significance for all of Hong Kong and its people.

In the period before the handover of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China on July 1, 1997, the Tang lineage of Lung Yeuk Tau, like other lineages in the New Territories, had the opportunity to use their historical monuments to showcase their history and culture as “heritage.” They used the public interest in their historic buildings, walled villages, ancestral halls, and temples to promote the identity of their lineage and gain recognition from the state authorities. The village elites, represented by village representative Tang-nam (a pseudonym), who was also an elected district councilor in the Northern District, supported the government’s initiative to establish the second heritage trail in the New Territories after the Ping Shan Heritage Trail (Cheung, 2003).

¹ In this article, Hong Kong place names are spelled according to the Hong Kong government (1960). Names of places in Chinese are romanized in pinyin. Cantonese terms are romanized in accordance with Lau (1977). Personal names are pseudonyms, unless they can be read in public records.

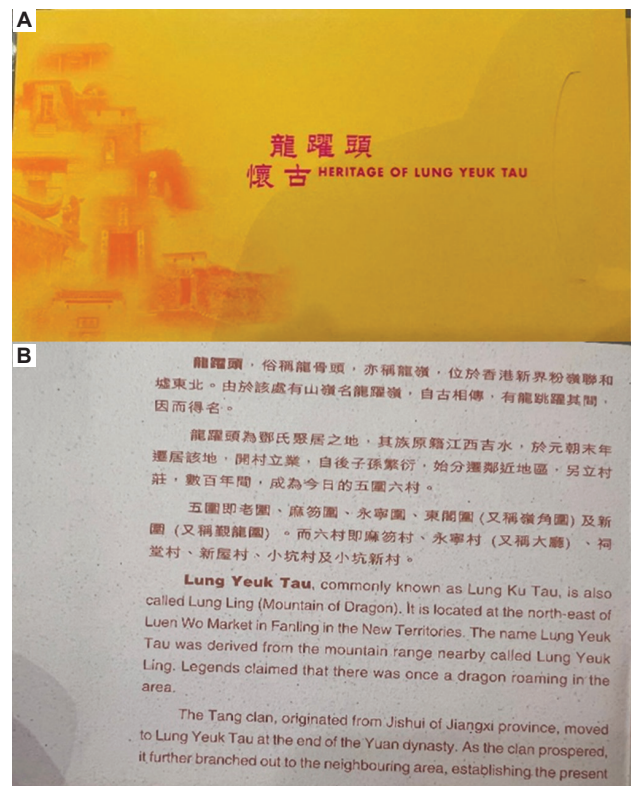


Figure 1. The pamphlet *Heritage of Lung Yeuk Tau* was distributed by the Antiquities and Monuments Office during the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Day held in March 1997. (A) Cover. (B) Content describing Lung Yeuk Tau. Source: Photograph courtesy of the Antiquities and Monuments Office

The Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail was inaugurated on December 4, 1999 (Antiquities and Monuments Office, 1999). Monuments, such as ancestral halls, temples, and walled village gates were declared public heritage sites for visitors from the city. The village elites welcomed tourists visiting the trail. However, for some parts of the lineage, being classified as “public property” meant that their private rights would be lost under the government-sponsored tourism policy.

In the following section, I will shed light on the intersection of village politics and the interpretation of sovereignty over cultural heritage through a critical examination of the ways in which Lung Yeuk Tau designated itself as a destination for cultural tourism. This serves to explore what heritage looks like as a production of the past in the present and what actors (actants) were involved in this process of “making” heritage according to modernist dualisms, such as nature and culture, human and non-human, and social and natural (Latour, 1993; 1996; 1999b; Latour & Woolgar, 1979). In addition, the study will also analyze the real cases of local legends or myths as a means of manipulating the symbolic image of a place (McKay, 1994). I will further explore symbolism and identity-related issues as an approach that effectively

captures the role of buildings as actors in terms of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005).

2. Heritage, politics, and identity

What is heritage? This is a fundamental question, but one that is not easy to answer. You simply have to realize that heritage means different things to different people. It can be something you buy in an antique store, something that is passed down within a family or an organization, or social and cultural customs that are passed down in different countries in a global context. Due to this ever-changing nature, "cultural heritage" can never be precisely defined and is subject to different meanings and interpretations. As Olsen (2003) noted, heritage preservation is not just about preserving the past, but about creating a new class of things. It augments our materiality rather than just stabilizing or preserving what we already have. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) also argued that "heritage is here" and that the heritage industry represents a new form of "cultural production." She noted that cultural heritage can not only give buildings, neighborhoods, and ways of life a second life as exhibits, but also produce something new that draws on the past.

2.1. Meaning of heritage and politics

The meaning of heritage can thus be understood as a creation resulting from the politics between different groups of people within a society. The interests and goals of the groups are negotiated through the question of heritage. Heritage can be a profoundly political issue, with places and states often at odds, and museums and their collections finding themselves in the middle of this storm (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1992). While heritage is related to the negotiation between group interests, it can also be manipulated for cultural tourism purposes. From this perspective, heritage can be seen as a destination for visitors (Balcar & Pearce, 1996; McCain & Ray, 2003; Silberberg, 1995). As Dicks (2003, p. 126) stated:

"Heritage is about journeys, not only itineraries that visitors follow through exhibitions but also metaphorical or literal journeys, which constitute their personal life stories. Heritage is also valued culturally and economically."

In his research on culture on display, Dicks (2003) further pointed out that heritage is produced within the cultural economy of visitability, in which the objective is to attract as many visitors as practicable to the intended site and to communicate with them in meaningful terms.

Research on cultural tourism or heritage tourism has often focused on the characteristics of the destination that attract visitors interested in the various aspects of heritage, such as historical, artistic, and communal heritage values. Silberberg (1995, p. 361) defined cultural tourism as:

"...visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by interest in the historical, artistic, scientific, or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community, region, group, or institution."

It is clear from these studies that the politics of heritage in the host community, and in particular how the meaning of heritage emerges from the contest between the Indigenous population, tourists, and state authorities, is a topic of growing interest to academics interested in the study of local knowledge.

Who has the authority and knowledge to "create" the history that constitutes our past? Who is destined to protect the heritage that is a significant part of the cultural past? Heritage can be used to reveal the selective version of a nation's history for education. The typically accepted discourse of heritage protection in the United States (US) is that:

...historic preservation aims to protect a portion of this country's history for future generations, to provide continuity between past, present, and future, and to preserve a significant part of the cultural past for future scientific research. (Verrey & Henley, 1991, pp. 75–76)

The community seems to have accepted that heritage is important for future generations and should be preserved. However, the process of preserving a historic site is also related to local politics and is not necessarily dictated by the nation. Verrey & Henley (1991, pp. 76) indicated that "management of cultural resources is a decidedly political process." In their studies of the politics of historic preservation in the District of Columbia and Virginia, US, they found that a popular discourse about the past held by neighborhood residents can be at odds with the interpretation of professionals and that a coalition of residents may use the interpretation of history to stop, alter, or control planned changes in their community – in other words, that heritage can be used to achieve goals not based on the preservation of historic resources. For example, in the preservation of the American Civil War site Fort C. F. Smith, the communities involved in the preservation used history as a means to protect other valued aspects of their lives and to gain decision-making power over the development plan. As Aplin (2002, p. 14) pointed out:

...the concept of heritage is appropriated as a further manifestation of the group's dominance in politics and national debate. Ownership of at least part of the officially recognized heritage of a country is important to many groups to help manufacture and maintain their group identity. Examples of these groups are indigenous peoples, migrant groups, religious denominations, and local communities...

These examples related to the politics of preservation show how people jockey for position to interpret history or heritage to achieve certain goals. Heritage preservation

thus becomes a product of local politics and negotiations between the parties involved, which can distract from the original purpose. Whether a historic site can be preserved or not depends on whether a compromise can be reached between the different groups in the preservation process. The meaning of heritage, as interpreted by different interested groups in the conservation process, may conflict, as their views on history may not be the same.

2.2. Heritage preservation in Hong Kong: The post-colonial and post-modern

Heritage is often used to represent a part of the “history” of a nation or a group of people, as it is closely linked to the notion of identity. Identity issues are an important aspect of post-colonial views on heritage as a construction of knowledge and power (D’Hauteserre, 2004; Foucault, 1980). Lowenthal (1975) also pointed out that heritage is highly selective, engaging, and validating only those aspects of a people’s past that they wish to identify and that heritage politics is likely to be politically charged.

Since the 1990s, the promotion of heritage conservation has become an important task on the Hong Kong Government’s agenda. Educational programs for teachers, students, and the general public reached their peak in 1997, when reunification with China was celebrated. During this significant political change, the government used heritage to promote a sense of identity among Hong Kongers, especially the younger generation, and to educate them about the territory’s cultural past. Therefore, 1997 was declared the “Year of Heritage,” and an international conference on heritage and education was held at the end of the year.

In the post-1997 period, heritage and education continued to be a major concern of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government’s education policy. The Chief Executive of the HKSAR emphasized the importance of the link between the Chinese culture and Western culture in Hong Kong in his policy speech in 1999 (Tung, 1999). This policy is echoed in the heritage exhibitions organized by the government, which always emphasize the link between Hong Kong culture – or Guangdong culture, part of Lingnan (southern China, including Guangdong and Guangxi provinces) – and orthodox Chinese culture, along with the use of colonial buildings as a legacy to attract tourists on heritage tours. The government tends to self-determine which treasures represent the territory’s cultural past and belong to all Hong Kong citizens.

Many definitions of heritage have been put forth by different government agencies and policies. In general, heritage is defined as archaeological sites, historical objects, historical buildings, and cultural landscapes

that witness a place’s history and shape citizens’ cultural identity, according to the government’s promulgation of the *Policy Recommendation Report* by Culture and Heritage Commission (2003 para. 6.1). In this connection, the Hong Kong government represents the agency of modern development projects, which seek to define “Hong Kong Heritage” for the general public. Regarding Hong Kong’s heritage conservation policies, which are designed to protect its cultural and historical assets, some official documents include the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance, Heritage Impact Assessment Guidelines, Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme, and Conservation Guidelines for Historic Buildings.

However, a group of local people who identified themselves as having a culture not recognized by the general public would always challenge the discourse of the dominant group, such as government authorities or specialists. Why did such a difference exist between the dominant group and the less dominant group? How did the state put forward its interpretation to the community, and how did the community respond to such a challenge to their indigenous identity? Was heritage a component of indigenous identity? David Lung, the former chairman of the Antiquities Advisory Board, and Ann Friedman noted in their analysis of heritage preservation that residents of the same indigenous village or even individual families either supported or opposed AMO interference in their internal affairs (Lung & Friedman, 1997).

From the official discourse, the heritage preservation of Lung Yeuk Tau was fully supported by the government and well-received by the community. However, the process of negotiation and compromise in the establishment of the heritage trail in the indigenous villages has seldom been explored. In this study, I demonstrate that local legends or myths assist the lineage in redefining heritage by positioning Lung Yeuk Tau’s identity *vis-à-vis* the promotion of heritage tourism and examine how a “heritage trail” can become the venue for the production of significance and competition for interpretation over its meaning.

With ANT as a framework, the human actors involved in heritage preservation policies were identified and monitored to evaluate whether the preservation of Chinese traditional architecture was successful in policy implementation (Mattison & Norris, 2005). ANT is a body of theory associated with science studies and, in particular, the work of Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michel Callon, which involves a material-semiotic method. The aim is to understand how people, ideas, technologies, and nature form networks. Relations within the network are not conceptualized as pre-existing but rather are seen

as precarious, emerging within the course of network interactions, and requiring constant repetition (Leslie, 2009). What is significant in the network (often called relationships or *guanxi* in traditional Chinese society) is how both human actors and non-human actants are involved (Birtchnell, 2021). With ANT, the author demonstrates how the indigenous inhabitants, elites of the villages, and specific non-human actants, in particular, Chinese vernacular architecture, form a network that influences the outcome of heritage preservation.

The author adopts ANT as a theoretical basis for analyzing the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail because it emphasizes the distributed and relational character of agency, in which agency is not limited to human actors but extends to non-human entities (actants). This perspective is crucial for understanding complex socio-technical systems in which technologies, objects, and environments play an active role in shaping outcomes. While Eric Hobsbawm's concept of the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1993) resonates with the meaning of heritage and politics, it is rooted in historical materialism and tends to emphasize human agency and class struggle, often overlooking the role of non-human actants. In contemporary contexts, as in the case of the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail, ANT's comprehensive approach offers a more nuanced understanding of agency.

In addition, the ANT-based studies of heritage in "Greater China," such as those on Taiwanese folk religion, can be used to contextualize the Hong Kong case. Taiwanese folk religion offers a rich context for ANT-based heritage studies. In Taiwan, the religion is deeply embedded in local communities and involves a complex network of deities, rituals, temples, and practitioners. ANT has been used to analyze how these elements interact to sustain religious practices and heritage (Chiu, 2021; Zhou & Fan, 2019). Temples in Taiwan are not just physical structures but hubs of activity where deities, worshippers, priests, and cultural artifacts interact. The role of local communities and government policies in preserving Taiwanese folk religion can be analyzed through ANT. For example, the interplay between community-led initiatives and state-led heritage preservation efforts can be examined to understand how heritage is negotiated and maintained. Recent studies of community-driven heritage in East Asia also demonstrate how ANT's focus on material or digital actants captures grassroots preservation dynamics more effectively than structuralist models (Chen & Wu, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2020; Yi, 2023).

3. Study methods

This study used a multilevel qualitative approach (Maxwell, 2005) to explore the complex relationship between the

contested nature of heritage and identity within the complex unity of villages. Fieldwork in Lung Yeuk Tau was conducted from October 2001 to March 2004 and from January 2023 to February 2024. From September 2002 to August 2003, I regularly visited, at least 4 times a month, the area and its neighborhood to learn about the status and changes in the community. As a participant observer, I engaged in many special and ordinary events, such as religious activities, worship of local deities, sacrifices at ancestral graves and other festive activities, and a trip to Dongguan in Guangdong province to participate in the Tangs' sacrifice at the ancestral grave of Wong Koo (the Imperial Aunt). The data collected during the fieldwork contributed to the collection of primary information in this study. The fieldwork was conducted under the conditions of a post-modern cultural framework, which supports an intensive analysis of high-quality empirical material drawn from a small number of respondents (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

In-depth interviews are suitable for ethnography as they enable researchers to gain insights into opinions, experiences, motives, and ideas that could not be easily obtained through observation alone (Gao *et al.*, 2012). Throughout the study, 30 interviews were conducted, involving 15 informants. These informants were selected from three different levels: ordinary members of the lineage, village representatives or veteran organizers of village activities, and professionals involved in heritage conservation and management (including government officials). The reason for selecting the interview participants was that they represented the different levels of those involved in the conservation of the heritage trail. The interviews were carried out during the same period as participant observation, that is, from September 2002 to August 2003 and from January 2023 to August 2024. I conducted in-depth interviews with informants and practitioners who were deemed suitable and knowledgeable due to their age and experience in the field of heritage conservation. The interviewees were deemed suitable and knowledgeable due to their seniority and professional experience dating back to the late pre-1997 period.

Secondary data were collected from folk and archival documents. I collected vernacular documents from informants or copied them from library collections, such as genealogies, memorials, and manuscripts. The archival documents were government records, such as land registry records, company records, information files on monuments held in the AMO, and the archives of the Public Records Office of the Hong Kong Government. These materials reflect the tangible and intangible aspects of the Tang lineage's heritage by incorporating the attractions and

celebrations of local society. The methodology, therefore, consisted of a combination of fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and library and archive research. This approach contributed to a holistic investigation and was effective in addressing the research questions outlined in this study.

4. History and demographics

The case of Lung Yeuk Tau illustrates a cluster of 11 villages linked to the Tang lineage through ancestor worship and land ownership (Figure 2). Lung Yeuk Tau, recognized as a village cluster in Fanling, was also known as “*Lung Kwat Tau*” (a piece of dragon skeleton) in government records (Hong Kong Government, 1960). Geographically, it is a low-lying area located north of *Lung Shan* (Dragon Hill). Administratively, Lung Yeuk Tau belongs to the Northern District of Hong Kong. During the Qing dynasty (1636 – 1912), it was part of Hsin-an county in Guangdong province. Following the 1898 lease of the New Territories to the British government, Lung Yeuk Tau came under British rule as part of the territory of Hong Kong, which

was initially ceded through the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 after the First Opium War. According to the 1911 census data, Lung Yeuk Tau had a population of 670 (Table 1). After the Second World War, the population grew considerably, reaching 2,400 by the 1960s, comprising mainly two dialect groups: Punti and Hakka. However, by the 1980s, the population declined slightly, likely due to urban migration and overseas emigration. By 2001, the population had risen again to over 4,500, including residents in newly established villages (Table 2).

The Lung Yeuk Tau community originally relied on rice cultivation for their livelihood. According to the villagers, many of the paddy fields were owned by the Tang lineage. These lands were registered in the 1905 Block Crown Lease, a register prepared by the Land Court under the New Territories Ordinance of 1900. This register demarcated each individual plot of land for all villages in the territory, serving as a basis for tax collection and adjudication of land ownership disputes (Chun, 2000). As the paddy fields were also leased to tenants, the Tangs were able to earn income as landowners. In the post-war years, the Hong Kong government began promoting the cultivation of vegetables, as the local rice market struggled to compete with imports from Mainland China. Many immigrants from the Mainland settled in Lung Yeuk Tau and set up vegetable farms. These vegetables were sold at the Luen Wo Market, which was built on the northeast side of Fanling Railway Station in the 1950s.

Following the signing of the Joint Declaration between China and Great Britain in 1984, the New Territories, together with the Kowloon Peninsula and Hong Kong Island, were reunified with the People's Republic of China in 1997, forming the HKSAR. Under the Basic Law, the HKSAR was granted a high degree of autonomy, allowing capitalism to continue to operate. Indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories were afforded certain rights in relation to their customs and traditional practices. These rights are protected under Article 40 of the Basic Law, which states, “The lawful traditional rights and interests of the indigenous inhabitants of the ‘New Territories’ shall be protected by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.” After reunification with China, indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories enjoyed special treatment in contrast to the urban population.

The geographical area of Lung Yeuk Tau is essentially divided by Sha Tau Kok Road (southwest-northeast direction) into two distinct parts. The southern part mainly comprises older villages, such as Lo Wai, Ma Wat Wai, Wing Ning Wai, Tung Kok Wai, Ma Wat Tsuen, Tsz Tong Tsuen, and Wing Ning Tsuen. In contrast, the northern part consists of newer villages, such as Kun Lung Wai

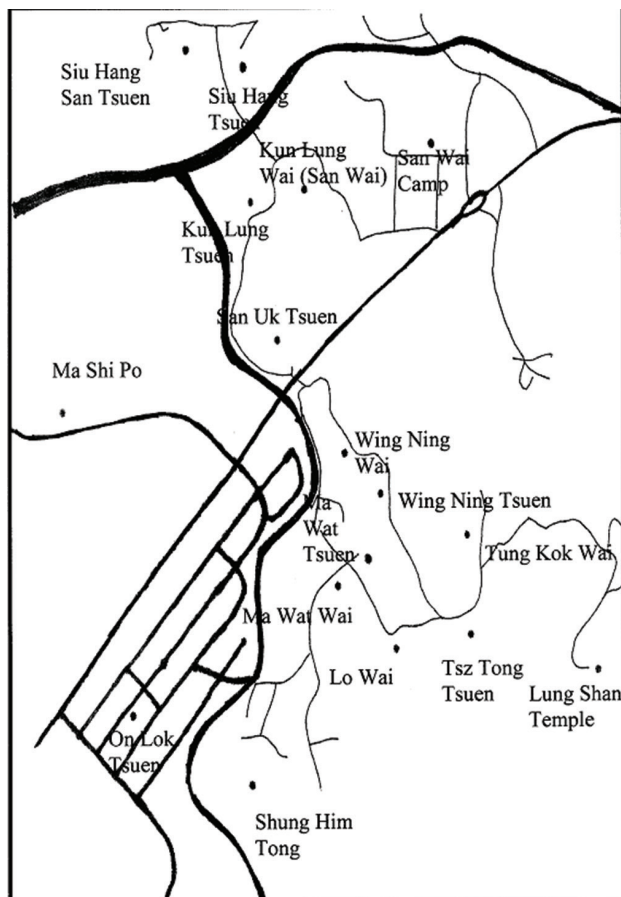


Figure 2. Location of Villages in Lung Yeuk Tau
Source: Map from the Hong Kong Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department, 2004

Table 1. Census data for Lung Yeuk Tau (1911 – c. 1980)

Village	1911 census			1968 Taga Akigoro survey			c. 1980 AMO survey
	Male	Female	Total	Tang household	Non-Tang household	Total	Population
Lo Wai	17	16	33	27	0	230	100
Tsz Tong Tsuen (Lo Tsuen)	52	52	104	35	16	400	-
Ma Wat Wai	28	21	49	33	15	260	400 (including Ma Wat Tsuen)
Ma Wat Tsuen	11	7	18	10	0	60	-
Tung Kok Wai	34	31	65	20	0	150	100
Wing Ning Wai	21	19	40	15	3	100	200 (excluding Tangs)
Wing Ning Tsuen (Tai Tang)	42	45	87	30	0	270	-
San Wai	29	28	57	28	0	300	20 – 30
San Uk Tsuen	70	67	137	45	0	500	>400
Siu Hang Tsuen	25	17	42	25	0	220	-
Shung Him Tong (Tsung Ham Tong)	19	19	38	-	-	-	-
Total	348	322	670	268	34	2,490	At least 1,220

Source: Data from Census Office (1911), Akigoro (1982), Zhao (1998), Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO): The population on c. 1980s AMO survey.

Table 2. Census data of Lung Yeuk Tau (2001)

Area/village	Population
Wing Ning Tsuen, Wing Ning Wai	1,337
Lo Wai, Ma Wat Tsuen, Ma Wat Wai, Pu Kat Tsai, Tsz Tong Tsuen, Tung Kok Wai	1,606
Kan Lung Tsuen, Suen Douh Camp, Sacred Blood Children Village	1,852
Total:	4,795

Source: Data from the Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, available at the Centamap website (<http://www.centamap.com/cent/index.htm>).

(San Wai), Kun Lung Tsuen, San Uk Tsuen, and Siu Hang Tsuen. According to oral tradition, this village cluster has historically been referred to as the “Ng Wai Luk Tsuen.”

5. The religious life

In Lung Yeuk Tau, the Tangs worshipped several tutelary deities, including Tin Hau (*Tianhou*, 天后; Goddess of Heaven), whose temple was located adjacent to the ancestral hall (Figure 3), *Guanyin* (观音) in a nearby monastery, and the Song princess Wong Koo. According to oral tradition, the Tin Hau Temple was built before the ancestral hall because it was generally considered inauspicious to build a temple that shared feng shui alignment with an ancestral hall, as this could negatively affect the prosperity of the lineage. Therefore, village elders have long considered relocating the

Tin Hau Temple to another location. According to a former Tang village representative, other temples, previously dedicated to the worship of male gods, such as *Caishen* (财神; God of Fortune), *Xuanyuan Huangdi* (轩辕黄帝; the ancestor of all Chinese), and *Dawang* (大王; Great King), were demolished (Interview with Tang-nam, June 14, 2002). Villagers explained that some of these temples were not rebuilt due to feng shui reasons.

In my observations and field research, I found that the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs regarded Yuen Leung as their progenitor, evidenced by the annual sacrificial rites performed at his grave in Dongguan. His ancestral tablet was placed at the highest and most central position on the central altar in the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall (a hall commemorating the ancestor Tang Chung Ling)—an indication of the intertwining importance of ancestor worship and genealogical recording (Figure 4). The ancestral hall, though named after Chung Ling (a descendant of Chi Ming born in 1302 AD), commemorates his foundational role in the settlement of Lung Yeuk Tau. However, the genealogy offers little detail about Chung Ling’s personal history, character, achievements, or contributions to the lineage. While his early migration to Lung Yeuk Tau is acknowledged, there are no recorded landholdings held in trust under his name (Baker, 1979).

Compared to his father, Lung Kong is described in considerable detail in the genealogy. He is described as



Figure 3. Parade of Tin Hau (Goddess of Heaven) in Tai Ping Ching Chiu festival (*Taipingqingjiao*, 太平清醮) held in Lung Yeuk Tau in December 2003

Source: Photograph by the author in 2003

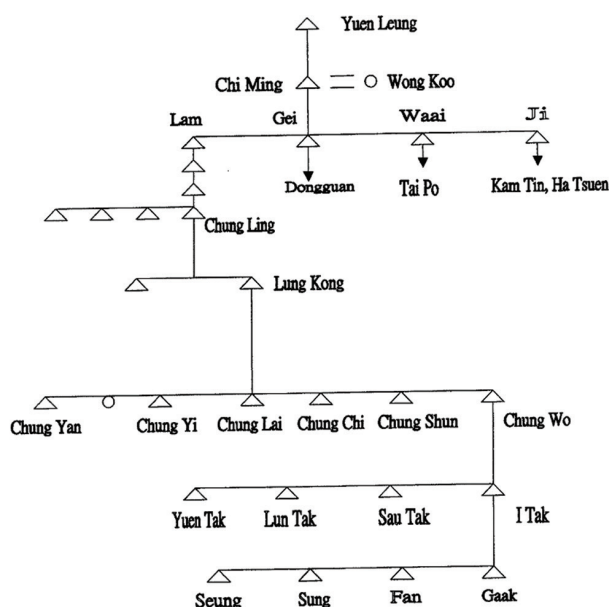


Figure 4. Genealogy chart of the Tang lineage of Lung Yeuk Tau

Source: *Longyuetou Deng Shi Pu Xi* (Genealogy of the Tang Surname at Lung Yeuk Tau) (Year Unknown)

intelligent, knowledgeable, righteous, and fond of reading. He is also said to have admonished his descendants to be sensible and honest. His epitaph, written and engraved by officials from *Li Bu* and *Du Cha Yuan*, was recorded as a tribute to his achievements. This level of official recognition indicates that Lung Yeuk Tau was accorded a significant status in the eyes of the imperial government at that time. Two generations after Chung Ling, the lineage was divided into six main branches, although one branch

eventually relocated to Yongan, Guangdong. Most villagers today consider there to have been five founding branches. These branches spread into five walled villages and six unwall villages (Tanaka, 1992).

After a thorough study of the genealogy compiled for the entire Tang lineage, it became evident that, apart from the description of Yuen Leung and Lung Kong as important figures in the Tang lineage, there is a noticeable absence of detailed documentation regarding the flourishing development of the lineage in Lung Yeuk Tau. Similarly, the genealogy does not provide explanations about the establishment of the Ng Wai Luk Tsuen, nor does it elaborate on the formation of various ancestral trusts. However, other genealogies from specific branches of the lineage mention significant historical changes, including a famine in a particular year and the difficulties due to an evacuation order issued during the early Qing dynasty.

The genealogies describe the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs as a sub-lineage that developed from the main Tang lineage in Kam Tin (now a rural area in the Yuen Long District of the New Territories). This affiliation is also substantiated by genealogical records, which have led some historians to believe that the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs were descended from those of Kam Tin and should be considered a branch of that lineage (Faure, 1984; Siu, 1990). However, this interpretation warrants scrutiny. According to the materials from the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall in Dongguan, the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs may have historically enjoyed a more prosperous status than their Kam Tin counterparts. However, a coastal evacuation weakened the influence of the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs, leading to them being subordinated to the Kam Tin Tangs and retrospectively regarded as a branch (Tanaka, 1992).

The Wong Koo legend holds symbolic significance for the heritage of the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs, especially in comparison to other Tang lineages in the New Territories. Although its veracity has yet to be verified, the Wong Koo legend has been repeatedly defined, understood, and manipulated by the Tang lineage. It may continue to serve as a source of perceived “uniqueness” to maintain their social status. Therefore, we can assume that the local society constructed a lineage heritage linked to royal descent. The Tangs responded to the global heritage preservation trend with their myths, which still sounded legitimate to government officials, tourists, and heritage preservation advocates.

6. Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall as an actor in narrating the history of a lineage

In 1999, the Hong Kong government set up the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail (Figure 5) to foster cultural



Figure 5. Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail
Source: Map by the Antiquities and Monuments Office

tourism and promote Chinese heritage in the territory. The 2.6-kilometer walking trail connects all the heritage buildings and villages across the Ng Wai Luk Tsuen. Apart from the grand narrative, we cannot ignore the role of a particular actor or agent, human or non-human, in understanding the preservation of cultural heritage that has brought about change. Latour (1999a) and Serres (1987) argued that since pre-history, human and non-human entities have been integrally linked through a series of relationships, where the essential features were perceived as mixed or shared (Olsen, 2003; 2007). Since the 1980s, the introduction of heritage protection by the government in the New Territories and the promotion of heritage by the Hong Kong Tourist Association (renamed the Hong Kong Tourism Board in 2001) as a traditional culture distinct from the urban have reframed the role of ancestral property. Anthropologists have paid particular attention to how such property is manipulated to achieve certain goals in the broader social and political context of Hong Kong.

Cheung pointed out (1996) that the closure of the first heritage trail of the Ping Shan Tangs, another branch of the five major segments of the Tangs in Guangdong, in 1995 reflects how monuments representing cultural heritage can be used for power bargaining and how conflicts arise due to the different understanding of feng shui by the government and the lineage. This closure was triggered by the removal of a long-standing ancestral graveyard of the Ping Shan Tangs in Lau Fau Shan due to a government landfill project. The case was also a notable example of the conflict between the state-endorsed interpretations of history and cultural heritage and the lived heritage of powerful lineages. In terms of the socio-political significance of heritage construction in Ping Shan, Foucault's approach to examining the control



Figure 6. Central chamber in Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall
Source: Photograph by the author (2003)

of certain monuments was significant in understanding the importance of heritage preservation in local society. How, then, did the Tangs construct their heritage through the monuments they possessed to maintain the dominance of their lineage in the New Territories?

In Lung Yeuk Tau, the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall (Figure 6) served as an actant to narrate the history of the Tangs and reaffirm their relationship with the emperor—specifically their claimed descent from Wong Koo. The Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall is the most significant heritage building in the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail and is located in Tsz Tong Tsuen, the heart of Lung Yeuk Tau. In 1997, the Hall was declared a monument site by the government under the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance (Cap. 53) for its architectural and historical merits. Built in 1525, it is not only the oldest ancestral hall in the entire New Territories, but also one of the oldest ancestral halls in Guangdong. According to local belief, the stones used in the construction came from Dongguan, and the hall was built in memory of the founding ancestor Chung Ling. On the central altar of the rear chamber, Yuen Leung was worshipped as the first generation ancestor, as he founded one of the five main branches of the Tangs in Guangdong. On the right side, his son Chi-ming and his wife, Wong Koo (surname Zhao), were venerated. This ancestral tablet was marked by a dragon's head, representing royal status. The hall served as a place for the Tangs to assert their “royal kinship.” Although other ancestral halls erected in Kam Tin and Ha Tsuen (another Tang lineage village branching off from Kam Tin) also featured Wong Koo's tablets, their worship had no bearing on the status of the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs, who made a prominent claim to the royal connection (Faure, 1986).

The erection of the ancestral hall served not only as a symbol of official status but also helped to standardize the lineage. Faure (1986, p.165) pointed out that “the establishment of the hall of the official style represented an important stage in lineage building because it provided symbols of territorial and lineage unity.” From the above, we can assume that the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall is a representative heritage building in this area, serving as a non-human actor in shaping the heritage of the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs.

On numerous occasions, the government claimed that setting up a heritage trail linking the monuments in the area was brought about with the full support of local residents. For example, in a speech delivered at the opening ceremony of the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail, the honorable Leung Chun-ying GBS JP, the then Convenor of the Executive Council, said:

The fact that this meaningful project can be brought into being is due to the full support of local villagers, the donations from The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust for sponsoring the restoration work of the historic buildings in the area as well as the assistance of both the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust and the Hong Kong Tourist Association in promoting this Trail. (quoted from an unpublished manuscript “Opening ceremony of the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail and rehabilitation ceremony of Lo Wai jointly organized by Tang clan of Lung Yeuk Tau and the AMO of the Home Affairs Bureau,” December 4, 1999).

The government is considered the agent of heritage buildings, which claims to protect the vernacular buildings when introducing heritage conservation policies in Lung Yeuk Tau. The AMO conducted historical appraisal reports, prepared the relevant official documents for declaration, appointed suitable contractors for renovation, and made publicity plans. By following the work of the government as the agent of the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall, we can trace the flow of knowledge to local society in the preservation of heritage buildings.

From an ANT perspective, ancestral halls become “obligatory passage points” because they act as central nodes through which various (human and non-human) actors/actants must pass to achieve their goals. These goals can include the maintenance of cultural identity, the performance of rituals, or the consolidation of social hierarchies.

First, the ancestral hall functions to align interests – human actors, such as family members, village elites, and ritual specialists, all have a stake in maintaining ancestral traditions and social cohesion of the lineage. The ancestral hall becomes the place where these interests converge.

As for non-human actants, ritual objects (e.g., ancestral tablets, incense, and offerings), architectural elements, and even the hall itself play a role in facilitating these interactions among actors.

The ancestral hall also acts as a center for the centralization of activities, as it is the main venue for important ritual activities, such as ancestor worship, festivals, and family gatherings (like the basin meal). These activities cannot be fully carried out without the ancestral hall, which is why it is essential to the network. During rituals, such as the Tai Ping Ching Chiu (the “purest sacrifice celebrated for great peace”) festival and the Tin Hau Festival, family members must gather in the hall to offer prayers and sacrifices. The hall becomes the physical and symbolic center of the ritual. By serving as an obligatory passage point, the ancestral hall also stabilizes the network by providing a fixed point of reference. It ensures that all actors are aligned and that the network holds together over time. The physical presence and symbolic meaning of the ancestral hall reinforce the continuity of ancestral traditions in Lung Yeuk Tau, even if individual family members move away or pass away.

6.1. Village elite: Leading actor for the heritage trail

Tang-nam, whose office is in the Fanling Rural Committee, indicated in an interview that the Tangs are in favor of the Hong Kong government’s idea of setting up a heritage trail. This is because the idea is responsible for the maintenance and management, and heritage development could be a better way to showcase their traditional culture to the public. He recalled that negotiations for the establishment of the heritage trail began in the 1990s with the restoration of the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall, followed by Lo Wai. According to him, the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Day was the first major event held in 1997 with a large-scale basin feast in San Wai (Interview with Tang-nam, October 24, 2001).

The government explained to the public that the establishment of the trail was the outcome of successful cooperation between various parties. From observing the participants at the ceremony, it appears that Tang-nam was supported by two other representatives from the rural office, creating a web of relationships between the village elites who worked to ensure that the preservation of the trail was good for the entire lineage. One of them also delivered a welcoming speech as a representative of Lung Yeuk Tau villages:

Our clan supports the Government for the establishment of the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail. The trail not only provides opportunities for Hong Kong people to appreciate the simple but elegant historic buildings in the region, but also enables us to promote our traditional cultural life to overseas visitors in a

systematic way...the setting up of the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail is actually a milestone. (quoted from an unpublished manuscript "Opening ceremony of the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail and rehabilitation ceremony of Lo Wai jointly organized by Tang clan of Lung Yeuk Tau and the AMO of the Home Affairs Bureau," December 4, 1999)

The ceremony also celebrated the completion of the Lo Wai (old walled village) restoration project, and the representative who gave the welcome speech was also the village representative of Lo Wai. The government, village elites, and tourists (as a subtle agent of heritage) appeared to be working together to revive the past in the present through the ancestral hall, forming everyday networks of cooperation. While emphasis is placed on the material qualities of ancestral halls as non-human actants in the processes of heritage preservation and tourism in Lung Yeuk Tau, the role of human actors – particularly village elites – should not be overlooked. Represented by Tang-nam, these elites worked with their networks to preserve their cultural heritage. Lineage members who aligned with the village elites formed a local network involving human and non-human factors, such as the villagers of Lo Wai and its restored village gate, which had been declared a cultural heritage site. Through these networks, the village elites expanded their influence to gain the support of the villagers who benefited from the restoration project of historical buildings. As a result, these lineage members and other local residents were more inclined to cooperate with government officials, largely under the advocacy of the village elites.

From the perspective of indigenous inhabitants, however, the declaration could mean a surrender of their right to alter the structure. If a building is still used for private purposes, such as a residence, the owner would usually regard the declaration as an infringement on their ability to make alterations. The Ordinance states that "no person shall demolish, remove, obstruct, deface, or interfere with a monument" (Hong Kong Government, 1976). Therefore, some property owners were reluctant to agree to a declaration by the government, as the development potential of their properties could be significantly affected. The former Chief Secretary of the AMO addressed this issue in his speech at a conference (Chiu, 1999). The inclusion of the symbolic building of the Tang lineage, the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall, initially provoked different opinions among members of his lineage. However, he explained that thanks to the persuasion of his lineage agnates, the ancestral hall was successfully renovated with the help of government funds and expertise. Tang-nam noted that when he planned the heritage trail in the initial stage,

objections and obstacles were mainly due to the villagers' misunderstandings:

...the villagers felt that the property rights would be lost after the trail was set up. However, when they found that there were many successful cases, such as the Man Shek Liu Ancestral Hall in Sheung Shui and Lun Fung Man Ancestral Hall in San Tin, they began to recognize the advantages of government financial assistance and gradually changed their attitude. (Interview with Tang-nam, October 24, 2001)

Tang-nam also noted that they had not set up any special working group in the rural office to deal with government affairs. He emphasized that he was the "project officer" for the heritage trail and was in charge of meetings with government officials at the AMO (Interview with Tang-nam, October 24, 2001).

We can therefore conclude that the heritage was co-produced through the strategic agency of village elites, who maintained an effective network of relationships with the concerned villagers to gain their support for setting up the heritage trail. This also highlights the role of individual human actors and the relationship between people, material objects, institutions, and the government, as well as the connection between local society and the state. The support of the village elites and the resistance of other villagers represented the different opinions of lineage members on the project. In this case, the role of the village representative in incorporating the government's views into the community should not be overlooked.

Why was the village representative so enthusiastic about advancing the renovation of the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall? There is reason to believe that representatives were involved in the process of "opening up heritage" to the community through the negotiation process. Moreover, such a human factor could strengthen the status of the ancestral lineage by protecting the heritage and bringing monetary or non-monetary wealth to the lineage. The ancestral hall thus became a non-human factor that enables us to trace the organization and transformation of the lineage in contemporary society. It functioned as part of a network maintained by village elites who dominated village affairs. Ultimately, the production of heritage was composed of non-human actants and human actors who emerged in society.

7. Agent of the problem: Sin Shut Study Hall

Agency is contingent and emergent within social collectives, involving both human actors and non-human actants and manifesting in different forms (Joyce & Bennett 2010). The Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail may represent a

collective of “people” (e.g., bureaucrats, local actors, and tourists) and “things” (e.g., heritage sites, tourist facilities, and signposts). Although the Sin Shut Study Hall is part of the heritage trail, it has not been declared a monument site. During my fieldwork, it turned out that the managers of the hall considered it to be private property belonging to a segment of the lineage and were opposed to renovating it as part of the lineage heritage. In this case, the mutually beneficial relationship between the government and the local elites did not work, especially when the villagers’ views concerned the welfare of a segment of the lineage that did not actively participate in the affairs of the community.

Despite the successful transformation of the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall into a “public” heritage site, the government failed to convince a wealthy segment of the Tang lineage to preserve and renovate a magnificent and historic study hall in San Uk Tsuen, despite repeated lobbying efforts. The agnates of this lineage segment insisted that they had the right not to declare the building a monument and to open it to tourists. Tang-nam, who was in favor of cooperating with the government, referred to this study hall as a “problem case” within the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail (Interview with Tang-nam, June 14, 2002).

The villagers of San Uk Tsuen, especially the manager of the property, held a different view from Tang-nam and other village elites who supported the heritage trail. Why was Tang-nam able to get the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall included in the declaration list, yet unsuccessful in this case of the Sin Shut Study Hall? In the following section, I examine the background of the Sin Shut Study Hall (Figure 7) in relation to the Tang lineage for further explanation.

7.1. Sin Shut Study Hall: The architecture

The Sin Shut Study Hall was built in 1840 to commemorate and venerate Tang Wan-kai, the 19th-generation ancestor of the Tang lineage. It is currently jointly owned by the Sin Shut Tong, an ancestral trust representing a segment of the Tang lineage that claims to have come to wealth in the late Qing dynasty. Today, the hall is used by members

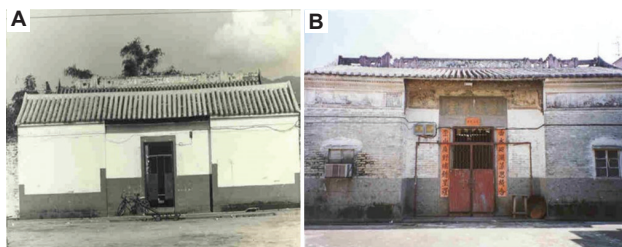


Figure 7. The Sin Shut Study Hall in (A) the 1960s and (B) the present day
Source: Photographs (A) courtesy of Lung Yeuk Tau Rural Office; and (B) by the author (2003)

of the Sin Shut Tong for worship and banquets as part of celebrations and festivals, such as the Chinese New Year and the Birthday of the Earth God.

According to a village elder, Tang Chung-nok (pseudonym), the Sin Shut Study Hall functioned historically as both an ancestor hall for worship and a place for the education of children. It was donated by the Sin Shut Tong ancestral estate and was originally administered by a Tang villager residing in San Wai (Kun Lung Wai), according to the government lease. The central altar features ancestral tablets dedicated to the 19th through 21st generations of the lineage, including those of Tang Wan-kai, in the order of generations.

7.2. The bureaucrats’ persuasion

The AMO, acting as the agency of the actant, attributed significant architectural value to the Sin Shut Study Hall. The building features two chambers and an inner courtyard. At the center of the rear chamber is an ancestral altar, while the adjoining rooms were historically used by students and teachers. The architectural merits of the hall were recognized during the launch of the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail in 1999. At that time, The Sin Shut Study Hall was presented as follows:

...situated in San Uk Tsuen, it was built in 1840 to commemorate and worship Tang Wan-kai, the 19th-generation ancestor of the Tang clan. The study hall is a two-hall building with a court flanked by covered aisles. A kitchen is located on one side of the entrance hall. Outside the main entrance is a threshing ground with small chambers on both sides. The building was used for ancestral worship as well as a study hall. Antique weapons, such as long-bladed knives, swords, bows, and arrows were once kept in the building. Before the Second World War, the building was used as a school until 1938. After the war, it was used as a kindergarten. Nowadays, it is occasionally used for holding banquets. This private property is not open to the public. (Antiquities and Monuments Office, 1999)

7.3. The managers’ refusal

As part of the AMO’s heritage protection project, the Sin Shut Study Hall was included on the priority list of buildings to be restored. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the restoration was announced at the official Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Day celebration in 1997. The government had already approved HKD 6.7 million in funding for the restoration project. However, due to the refusal of the managers of Sin Shut Tong, the funds were reallocated to other monuments, such as Shek Lo (rock mansion), Tung Kok Wai, and Wing Ning Wai, which were subsequently included in the heritage project.

Tang-nam claimed that the Sin Shut Study Hall belonged only to one or two families within this segment of the Tang lineage, who were particularly conservative and reluctant to cooperate with him. Since he had no personal stake in the study hall, he described himself as merely a “third party” in the negotiations with the government over its restoration (Interview with Tang-nam, June 14, 2002). Therefore, the managers of the Sin Shut Tong demonstrated full authority over the property and rejected Tang-nam’s proposal to renovate the hall. They also used their influence to sway the opinions of other villagers, thereby preventing the “prevailing” heritage narrative promoted by the rural office. In an act of defiance, the managers reportedly removed all notices posted by the rural office, which was represented by Tang-nam and the two other village representatives who supported the heritage project. We may assume that Tang-nam could not intervene in the network controlled by the managers of the Sin Shut Tong, unlike his influence over the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall and the later projects at Lo Wai, Tung Kok Wai, and Wing Ning Wai (deemed as the Lo Wai/Wing Ning Wai alliance).

A former AMO curator, Ms. Amy Liu (pseudonym), who was involved in the Lung Yeuk Tau project, told me that when she first talked to the villagers about the restoration project, they were not particularly receptive. She did not know how AMO staff followed up on the project thereafter. Ms. Amy Liu did not provide any specific reasons for the villagers’ firm opposition. However, she noted that, as a woman, she usually found it difficult to deal with the male-dominated society of Lung Yeuk Tau during the implementation of restoration projects:

If I were a man, I could drink beer with them or just punch them playfully on the shoulder to gain their trust. As a female, I instead had to use the method of conducting small-scale renovation projects for the buildings. In doing so, you will finally gain their trust as they see you are doing a good job... (Interview with Amy Liu, October 2002)

The former executive secretary of the AMO and Ms. Amy Liu had visited San Uk Tsuen to negotiate with the villagers about the restoration of Sin Shut Study Hall. The former executive secretary also invited a local tourism specialist, who subsequently visited the study hall. During the visit, the specialist encouraged the secretary to write to those responsible for the hall. However, the secretary reportedly responded, “Are you a manager of the hall?” The specialist replied to the secretary, “If I were a manager, I wouldn’t be talking to you” (Interview with Tang Chung-nok, October 2002). The specialist assumed that the secretary had attempted to contact the managers but to no avail. The plan was eventually suspended because one

of the three managers had major objections to the plan. The specialist suspected that the managers had made unreasonable demands on the government as a condition for approving the renovation.

Although Tang Chung-nok was not a manager of the hall, he maintained a cooperative relationship with government officials, for example, by ensuring that the hall was open for their visits. Ms. Amy Liu had also informed him that the study hall needed to be restored to its original appearance, as the roof was supported by a concrete truss that had altered the traditional structure. Tang Chung-nok bluntly replied that they had no money to renovate it (Interview with Tang Chung-nok, October 2002). A former member of the Antiquities Advisory Board noted that although funding had been approved to renovate the hall, the project could not be undertaken due to serious objections from the hall’s managers. Since the study hall belonged to a specific segment of the Tang lineage, they could not be forced to agree despite the village representative’s enthusiasm.

Despite the initiative of government officials and certain village elites or elders, the project to renovate the study hall was ultimately halted. However, there were still occasions when the hall was used by outsiders. On one occasion, a famous director rented the hall for filming, with the approval of the hall’s managers. After filming, however, it was discovered that two wooden screens placed on the altar had gone missing. It was eventually found that the film crew had mistakenly taken them as props, but the items were eventually returned to the villagers of San Uk Tsuen.

7.4. Private use for Earth God’s birthday

As the Earth God has watched over their village for hundreds of years, the Tangs believed that the god is important to the safety of the village, and that the god’s birthday should be celebrated annually to express gratitude for his protection. Watson & Watson (1997), in their study of change in the lineage settlement, raise the issue of the conflict between restoring the original architectural and artistic splendor of the Man Lun Fung Ancestral Hall, as defined by the experts, and the social significance of the ancestral hall, as interpreted by the residents of San Tin. They pointed out that when they first met the San Tin villagers in the late 1960s, the Man Lun Fung Ancestral Hall functioned as a center of village activities, the headquarters for the village guard, and a banquet center. However, after the hall was declared a monument and converted into a tourist center in 1997, the banquet tables and even the wooden benches were removed. It was tempting to conclude that the cost of preservation was the loss of community.

A member of the Sin Shut Tong, an ancestral estate of the Tangs in San Uk Tsuen, stated that they had the right to refuse the government's renovation proposal. Similar to the villagers of San Tin, the villagers of San Uk Tsuen also regarded the Sin Shut Study Hall as the main venue for the "Birthday of the Earth God" celebrations. The villagers would gather in the study hall to have their meals before proceeding to pray to the Earth God at their shrine at the entrance of the village. When I first visited the village for the Earth God's birthday in 2002, the festival was still open to other members of the Tangs and also to other relatives or friends. In 2003, however, those in charge began to restrict access, citing concerns over potential exploitation. A notice was posted in advance to inform the kinsmen that the basin feasts were exclusively reserved for members of the Sin Shut Tong. Violators would be expelled from the premises by the police.

The Sin Shut Study Hall functioned as a manifestation of the wealth of a specific segment of the Tang lineage. The negotiation process between the representatives of the village and the managers of the hall, as well as the government officials, reflected the tense relationship between the branches of the lineage. The social process and movements within the lineage did not align with the government's strategic plan. This lineage segment also leveraged heritage to differentiate itself from the elite class of the lineage. Besides, the managers of the hall demonstrated their authority by redefining the meaning of the hall and even excluding members outside the Tang Wan-kai families from attending the event. They interpreted the use of the hall as a private, lineage-specific entitlement rather than as the collective property of Lung Yeuk Tau or the public asset of Hong Kong. This exclusivity made the fundamental problem in the failure of the renovation project readily apparent.

8. Dispute in the restoration of lineage properties

From the above two cases, it is evident that Lung Yeuk Tau was divided over the issue of restoring two lineage properties, influenced by competing leadership or the authority of different village elders who controlled separate ancestral trusts. The village representative who wanted to preserve the "heritage" at all costs was perceived as representing the dominant interests of the Lo Wai and Wing Ning Wai alliance.

In the minds of the Tangs in San Uk Tsuen, the Sin Shut Study Hall remained a place that served as a family gathering place for all members of the Sin Shut Tong. A villager from San Uk Tsuen explained that it was their family affair whether or not they would allow the hall to

be renovated by the government. Given the loopholes in the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance, he believed there were benefits to not declaring it by the government. Thus, unlike the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall, the Sin Shut Study Hall was considered a private place for family reunions under the Sin Shut Tong's control. This case also showed that decisions on what constituted "heritage" were often shaped by those possessing the legitimate power to control resources and negotiate with the government.

The concepts of Foucault and Lefebvre offer valuable insights into the study of space and control in this case. On the one hand, the government was keen to define the Sin Shut Study Hall as a public heritage; on the other hand, the Tangs in the village could interpret the renovation as "damaging" their private property. The case of the Sin Shut Study Hall has shown that after the local village halls were recognized as "Hong Kong heritage," these buildings became a place of resistance for individuals against modern development projects. It also indicated that certain lineage members, by exercising dominant positions within village affairs, were able to make important decisions on behalf of their wider kin group. Despite the opposition of other agnates, these individuals were able to push through their agenda and realize their plans. They used their power as trustees, legalized by the government, to control and manipulate the "heritage" of their community or lineage for specific interests.

The interpretation of heritage in Lung Yeuk Tau was closely linked to village politics. The two parts, represented by Lo Wai/Wing Ning Wai alliance on one side and San Uk Tsuen on the other, competed over village affairs, the politics of heritage, the management of lineage property, the relationship between the state and lineage, and religious rituals. This rivalry shaped villagers' perceptions of how Lung Yeuk Tau should be structured internally and externally. In recent years, I returned to Lung Yeuk Tau for fieldwork during the Tai Ping Ching Chiu festival, which is held every 10 years. The latest ceremony took place in December 2023. This Daoist festival, centered on peace and renewal, involved villagers invoking their gods and spirits to harness the collective power of the gods to rejuvenate their lives.

About a month before the Tai Ping Ching Chiu festival, a large village gate inscribed with "Lung Yeuk Tau" was erected at the entrance of the village. It is located near the rural office building (i.e., in the southern part) but not in the northern part of the area, where the Sin Shut Study Hall is located (Figure 8). The gate was constructed in a hybrid of modernist and traditional styles using concrete and dragon symbols. This reinforced the division within Lung Yeuk Tau – despite its holistic designation as Ng Wai

Luk Tsuen by the government for heritage preservation. The southern and northern parts hold different views on heritage preservation, and this division is symbolized by the gate that marked the social boundary between the main factions of the lineage.

The Tai Ping Ching Chiu festival was held from December 16, 2023, to December 20, 2023. The main celebrations were held in a temporary bamboo theatre near the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall, with additional rituals/celebrations conducted at the hall, situated within the boundaries of Lo Wai/Wing Ning Wai of Lung Yeuk Tau (Figure 9). In contrast, no spectacular event of the Tai Ping Ching Chiu festival occurred in the northern part of Lung Yeuk Tau. As a result, although the festival is considered an intangible heritage of the indigenous inhabitants, its enactment reflected and reproduced the internal division of the community. Both villagers and government agencies appeared to focus on the heritage narrative centered around the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall, with which they were more familiar. The network of elite actors actively supporting official heritage discourse was firmly rooted in the Lo Wai/Wing Ning Wai alliance, while San Uk Tsuen remained largely peripheral in terms of participation in the festival.

It is worth noting that, following the establishment of the Ping Shan Heritage Trail in 1993 and the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail in 1999, a third heritage trail in the New Territories has yet to materialize. Over time, the Lung Yeuk Tau Tangs gradually lost their local influence, particularly as the area was transformed into a new town beginning in the 1980s, bringing in many new residents. This urban development placed the Tangs under significant pressure from the government to develop the area around them, leaving the future of their influence uncertain.

Tang-nam actively promoted the idea of “heritage” in Lung Yeuk Tau, successfully presenting a positive image of the lineage to outsiders while also enhancing his social status within the lineage and the outsiders. At one point, Tang-nam proposed to the AMO the creation of a heritage trail in Kam Tin, citing its wealth of historical monuments. However, after the local Tangs witnessed the unpleasant incidents of the closure of the Ping Shan Heritage Trail (Cheung, 1996), they abandoned the proposal (Interview with Tang-nam, October 24, 2001). As a result, the AMO shifted its focus to establishing the heritage trail in Lung Yeuk Tau instead. Unlike the situation in Ping Shan, the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail has not been affected by such protests.

Although the AMO issued a brochure to promote heritage in Kam Tin in the early 2000s, a heritage trail linking the various monuments—as seen in Lung Yeuk



Figure 8. The new village gate in Lung Yeuk Tau was erected on November 13, 2023

Source: Photograph by the author (2023)



Figure 9. The Tai Ping Ching Chiu festival, held every 10 years in Lung Yeuk Tau to purify the community, took place most recently in December 2023. This edition featured active participation from many villagers and included a unicorn dance. (A) The Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall during the festival. (B) The temporary bamboo theatre. (C) Part of the celebration of the festival was held inside the Tang Chung Ling Ancestral Hall.

Source: Photographs by the author (2023)

Tau—was never established. This suggests that the proposed heritage trail was not supported by the Kam Tin lineage community. Therefore, despite the failure of the Sin Shut Study Hall restoration project, Lung Yeuk Tau can still be regarded as a relatively “successful” precedent for the preservation of Chinese vernacular architecture in the New Territories. In my view, policymakers and heritage conservationists should refer to the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail to assess whether funding for renovation remains a decisive factor in the successful declaration of

heritage buildings. Heritage policy should also be reviewed to strengthen the engagement and expertise of scholars and other stakeholders, and to gain more support from the public community.

The above cases illustrate how class, gender, and generational divisions within a lineage profoundly influence heritage narratives, determining whose stories are told, how they are framed, and who has the authority to tell them. There are often conflicting interpretations of heritage among lineage members that are resolved by the actor-network of elites from diverse educational, age, and social backgrounds. These disputes are also shaped by non-human factors, such as the architectural elements of the buildings, walled villages, and study halls. This study highlights the dynamic interplay between lineage members and non-human elements, suggesting both can be utilized to find a solution that respects both the factual and emotional dimensions of heritage disputes. While the specific architectural elements of the ancestral legacy embody contested identities, the restoration practices of these lineage buildings represent a translation process through which a fair and respectful outcome can be achieved in the dispute between the priorities of the lineage and the state.

9. Conclusion

Using ethnographic data from the New Territories, this study has explored whether heritage promotion and preservation in Hong Kong are designed for the benefit of village elites who hold the legitimate authority to define the meaning of heritage. As shown in the preceding sections, certain village elites have effectively manipulated the meaning of heritage through a network of relationships in the local society. While Hobsbawm provides a critical lens on the political economy of heritage, ANT advances the debate by foregrounding material agency – showing how heritage is not merely constructed by human actors but co-produced through interactions with non-human actants. This makes ANT indispensable for analyzing contemporary heritage dynamics, where digital technologies, ecological changes, and object-oriented ontologies play increasingly visible roles. In the case of Lung Yeuk Tau, several key insights emerge. Although the potential limitation of relying on a single heritage trail is acknowledged, this study can be juxtaposed with other heritage trails in Hong Kong as a reference with significant value. These observations underscore that indigenous inhabitants, as human actors, reserve the right to argue with the government about the interpretation of heritage within the concept of private property as non-human actants.

First, the interpretation of Hong Kong's heritage and the establishment of heritage trails in rural parts of Hong

Kong reflects the complicated identity issues associated with traditional buildings, as perceived by both indigenous inhabitants and the Hong Kong government. As in most cases, heritage, as an actant in the preservation policy, is not a static concept in terms of time and material culture. From the government's perspective, the material culture side of traditional Chinese architecture is emphasized as a distinctive heritage in Hong Kong. This official narrative enabled the general public to understand the history and knowledge of the motherland and fostered a sense of belonging. In contrast, indigenous inhabitants in the New Territories of Hong Kong often interpret heritage as a symbolic monument representing their cultural achievements, ancestral identity, and recognition by the state. They are more inclined to share material culture as long as it remains neutral, particularly when heritage is used to represent the glory of their past. In rapidly urbanizing areas, such as the northern New Territories, with the acceptance of expert input and financial support for renovation, indigenous inhabitants represented by the village elites and representatives tend to be more cooperative with the government to avoid political conflict and maintain their influence in local society.

Second, it is clear from this study that indigenous inhabitants, represented by the village elites and village representatives, actively sought to maintain their traditions expressed in ancestral worship, feng shui, and religious activities, regardless of whether they supported or opposed renovation efforts. These traditions are an integral part of the material culture of the surviving architecture. Therefore, the interpretation of heritage could vary significantly among members of the same lineage or village cluster, depending on how these traditions are understood and circulated within the community. On one hand, some lineage members expressed skepticism toward government-led renovation efforts, questioning whether such projects truly served their interests or merely aligned with the state's heritage agenda. On the other hand, there was greater openness to the restoration of "collective" properties, such as temples, ancestral halls, gate towers, and walls, where personal or family interests were less pronounced.

The case of the study hall illustrates how some lineage members perceive heritage as private property, granting them the authority to interpret and control it according to their interests. The architectural and decorative merits of the hall do not appear to be of primary importance to these lineage members. While the restoration of the ancestral hall could be achieved through the cooperation of the elites with the government authorities, the discrepancy in interpretation between the lineage elites and their

members could reinforce the exclusion of outsiders from village affairs. In this sense, the lineage members, just like the leaders of the Sin Shut Study Hall, assert their right to dictate their communal and religious functions of heritage sites, often sidelining village representatives who have no stake in the heritage.

Third, heritage can sometimes represent the limited influence of village representatives in villages outside their domain, potentially because they were not part of that lineage segment and thus not effective in the respective relationship networks. As a result, in this study, the hall is not a declared monument despite its cooperative attitude with the state agency. Furthermore, some lineage members maintained that it is a private venue for lineage activities and other ritual practices. When a property is defined based on lineage trusts, tensions may arise during negotiations over heritage designation, particularly when patrilineal values or individual claims come into play. Such opposite views were circulated among the network as manipulated by the managers of the Sin Shut Study Hall. The competition for the use of the hall reveals the lack of control by the Lo Wai/Wing Ning Wai alliance when dealing with the property of lineage segments. Therefore, the network held by the managers of the Sin Shut Study Hall, who acted to interpret the heritage on their own, deterred the prevailing concept of the Lo Wai/Wing Ning Wai alliance headed by Tang-nam and his associates (i.e., the village representatives who were in cooperation with Tang-nam).

Given the complexities of the post-colonial era, rural politics, and cultural diversity in the northern New Territories, this study has highlighted a small yet important aspect for understanding a group of indigenous villagers through their interpretation of heritage. As in the presented cases, all factors, including different socio-political backgrounds, relationships among villagers, tourists, and government agencies, the establishment and maintenance of the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail, the declaration of monuments, and the ancestral halls renovation project, played as legitimate actors within a broader actor-network that constituted the creation of Hong Kong heritage. It is reasonable to argue that the government's unsuccessful extension of the heritage trail model to other areas in recent years is due to the loss of control over the actor-networks in local society and the ever-changing nature of village politics.

Last but not least, as the case of Lung Yeuk Tau shows, although the cultural heritage of mainland China, as expressed through rural Hong Kong, was emphasized by the Hong Kong government, the process of heritage creation and interpretation involved a constantly changing network of actors. This network included

heritage professionals, local elites, tourism specialists, and historical sites and architecture. These human and non-human actors were interwoven in a complex network of interactions. In particular, village elites or custodians in prominent positions often sought to manipulate the meaning of heritage to enhance their social status, especially in the context of modern development projects. Despite the elites' discourse that "conservation is good for the lineage," the contrary view of some lineage property managers should also be acknowledged when formulating heritage preservation policies. Their ability to mobilize the respective network that opposed the preservation should not be overlooked. While heritage conservation is a modern concept welcomed by numerous urbanites, it can clash with the priorities of prevailing interest groups in local society, complicating effective policy implementation. Therefore, some indigenous inhabitants will likely continue to resist government-led preservation efforts, defending their tangible heritage as a basis for maintaining their identity and agency in contemporary society. Ultimately, this case demonstrates that the concept of heritage, particularly Chinese vernacular architecture, is reinterpreted, designed, or manipulated by village elites who control key local networks, regardless of whether they support or oppose the protection policies introduced by the government.

Heritage serves as a platform where Indigenous communities cooperate and dispute, not only with each other but also with the government, over the ownership of land and property, as well as the right to thrive. Therefore, in modern society, heritage is regarded as a valuable legacy. However, in the transformation of a traditional settlement into an urbanized residential area, the interpretation of Chinese architecture can also show unimaginable diversity. The Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail is a significant case that deserves special mention in the broader field of Chinese architecture and urbanism.

To conclude, the findings on heritage actors in this study demonstrate the dynamic roles of human actors and non-human actants in shaping heritage narratives, underscoring the complex interplay between heritage and power in post-colonial contexts. By showing how cultural heritage is co-constructed through networks of actors, objects, and discourses, this perspective challenges monolithic interpretations of cultural heritage and exposes its instrumentalization as a means of political legitimation. In post-colonial contexts, cultural heritage often becomes a contested terrain where dominant groups selectively mobilize narratives to legitimize authority, erase marginalized voices, or reinforce national identities. However, recognizing the agency of different actors opens

up possibilities for a more inclusive and pluralistic heritage practice that resists hegemonic control and reflects the diversity of histories and memories. Thus, the study of actors not only enriches our understanding of heritage as a process but also critically engages with debates about its political use. It also argues for heritage as a site of decolonial resistance and democratization.

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Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study did not require ethics approval because it used only publicly available anonymized data and personal names are pseudonyms. The participants gave their consent prior to participation.

Consent for publication

Participants consented on the publication of their data.

Availability of data

The data supporting this study are derived from archival research, fieldwork, and interviews, which are partially sensitive due to privacy and ethical considerations. Anonymized data can be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to ethical review.

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