

Alternative Development in the Age of Global Capitalism:

Mui Wo, Lantau Island, 1997 - 2013

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Abstract

As a ‘global city’, Hong Kong has been undergoing endless transformations in the spatial organisation of its core districts over the past few decades. Building after building is demolished and built; road works also go on incessantly. Due to the exigencies of the capitalistic mode of production, space is (re-)organised and rationalised in ways so as to maximise efficiency and to speed up capital value production and social processes in general. Less than an hour’s ferry ride from the heart of urban Hong Kong, however, people disembark at the pier of Mui Wo, Lantau Island to find another story. There, residents rely on cycling as the main means of transport; winding, small paths weave through inland villages; time-space is perceived and experienced in ways distinct from the metropolis.

If the destructions and constructions in the Central Business District (CBD) of Hong Kong are ‘common sense’ and epitomise development in the era of global capitalism, how should I make sense of the ‘uncommon’ development of Mui Wo? If what is unfolding in the CBD represents the dominant form of development, is it the only path that we could follow? In this thesis, I critique capitalistic development in the age of global capitalism which, with the agent of the transnational capitalist class and the intervention of government, is leading to the homogenisation of space such that capital can extract its maximum surplus value possible out of space. By discussing the specificity and heterogeneity of the development of Mui Wo, I argue that it provides a case of how development is pursued in an alternative way in the age of global capitalism, that there exists the possibility of pursuing development that is not governed by capital. The marginality and rural traditions of Mui Wo provide resources and inspirations for us to interrogate the assumptions behind capitalistic development, and to see that there are

other possibilities. I am particular interested in the period between 1997 and 2013. My argument is that Mui Wo had been spared from the frenzy of capitalistic development by the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge in 1997 which ended its status as the ‘gateway’ to Lantau Island. For more than a decade, a less busy Mui Wo provided an alternative road to urbanites of the lower classes to experience a way of living that is different from the metropolis. Some independent artists took this opportunity to develop a unique philosophy of arts and living out of the resources and inspirations provided by Mui Wo, including its rural culture, and the people, animals, vegetation, farmlands and nature there. The marginality of these artists, together with the marginality of Mui Wo, is like a critical reflection on the metropolitan core, informing us all is not right in the wider society and the dominant culture. More importantly, through my discussions of this concrete case of Mui Wo, I seek to argue that an alternative path of development, though small, winding and difficult, is not merely a romantic dream, but can actually be reality.

全球資本主義下的另類發展：大嶼山梅窩 1997 – 2013

摘要

香港作為「全球城市」，過去數十年城市核心的空間布局不斷轉變。建築物相繼推倒再建，道路工程也無日無之。資本主義生產模式的壓迫需求，把空間（重新）組織、理性化，務求令效率極大化，加速資本價值生產和社會過程。然而，距離香港城市心臟地帶不足一小時小輪航程的大嶼山梅窩，卻馬上讓人感受不一樣的故事。當地居民以單車作為主要代步工具；村落裏穿插的是彎彎曲曲的小路；時間與空間的感知和經驗方式，許多方面都與香港大都會大不相同。

如果說，香港核心商業區不斷的推倒、建設已屬「常識」，也代表了全球資本主義之下的發展，我們該如何理解梅窩的「非尋常」發展？如果說，核心商業區所出現的代表了主導的發展形式，這又是否我們唯一可以依循的道路？我在本研究批判全球資本主義下的發展，如何在跨國資產階級的力量和政府干預的推動之下，令空間同質化，使資本可以從空間榨取最大的剩餘價值。通過討論梅窩發展的獨特性和異質性，我的論點是，梅窩展示了全球資本主義下另類發展的可能；也就是說，不受資本宰制的發展方式是可能、也是可行的。還有，世上並非只有一條放諸四海皆準的金光發展大道。梅窩的邊緣性和鄉村傳統，為我們提供資源和啟發，詰問資本主義發展背後的種種假設。本研究特別聚焦於一九九七至二零一三年這段時間。一九九七年，青馬大橋通車，令梅窩失去作為大嶼山「窗口」的地位。在隨後的超過十年期間，梅窩失去昔日的繁華，卻造就了另一條道路，讓市區基層人士也能體驗一種有別於大都會的生活方式。一些獨立藝術家也憑借梅窩的鄉村文化，同時受到當地人、動植物、田野提供的資源所啟發，發展出獨

特的藝術和生活觀。這些藝術家與梅窩的邊緣性就如大都會核心的一面批判鏡子，反映社會及主流文化的問題。更重要的是，我希望通過梅窩這個具體例子，說明另類發展這條道路儘管又彎又小，而且十分艱難，但它並非僅是浪漫的白日夢，而是可以發生的現實。

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Chapter 1 Introduction: Two tales of a city

i. Mui Wo, Lantau Island

Anyone disembarking for the first time from the ferry at Mui Wo in Lantau Island, which is the largest outlying island of Hong Kong, would be amazed at the sea of bicycles parked at the bicycle park beside the pier. Many visitors, local and foreign alike, spontaneously take out their camera to capture the scene. A man in his 50s visiting Mui Wo for the first time told me he had ‘never seen so many bicycles in one place’ in his lifetime.



The amazement of these visitors is no doubt related to the fact that Mui Wo is also part of Hong Kong, a city widely known for its high density and hectic life, that seems to have no time and space to accommodate any kind of such ‘slow’ means of transport as the bicycle. The fact that this 5,000- strong community can be reached in half an hour by ferry from Central, the busy Central Business District (CBD) of Hong Kong, only adds to the surprise.

Indeed, this bicycle park serves as a witness to a very unique everyday life practice. Residents in Mui Wo rely on cycling as the main mode of transport within the community. In other places of Hong Kong, even where cycling is practised, it is mainly

considered as a leisure sport. The practice of cycling for utilitarian purposes is unique not only by urban Hong Kong standards, but also among rural communities in the New Territories and other outlying islands of the territory. Like most other inhabited communities on outlying islands, the majority of Mui Wo is closed to motor vehicles. But unlike other outlying island communities like Peng Chau, Cheung Chau and Lamma Island where most inhabited places are relatively concentrated, Mui Wo is characterised by houses and settlements scattered through a vast piece of valley land. This makes cycling highly practical for residents to go around the twenty or so villages dispersed throughout Mui Wo, to go shopping in the old town area or to go and take the ferry – and hence the impressive bicycle park at the pier.



A sense of general trust and security is also needed to support cycling as a daily means of transport. Bike theft is one of the main reasons why people do not cycle on a daily basis even though they are aware of all the benefits – health, economic, environmental, etc. – that this practice would bring. I had lived in Shatin for almost ten years. There was an impeccable cycle track leading from the high-rise block where I resided to the railway station. However, bike theft at the station was so rampant that I

gave up the idea of commuting to the station on my bike altogether. In contrast, from the first day I arrived at the pier in Mui Wo and had a look at the bicycle park, I knew I could entrust my bike there. Bike thefts do happen occasionally, but the sheer number of bicycles parked in public places means that one's bike would be safe from the predatory eye if it is not an expensive model.

The practice of daily cycling also implicates a culture of slowness and casualness. It is very common for residents to wear slippers and shorts to go around different public places in Mui Wo – the market, restaurants, post office, grocery stores, etc. This atmosphere of casualness renders interactions among people easy and spontaneous. Everyone seems to know or recognise everyone else. Parents feel safe enough to let their young children ride their bicycles on their own. The two-wheeler is also where interpersonal intimacy can be accommodated, with common scenes of cyclists carrying their loved ones on the back seats. The expression of intimacy is no longer limited to the private sphere. As one resident wrote:

Mui Wo attracts me for its melange of the private and public spheres. When I first arrived (to settle here), I often saw junior primary school pupils riding their bicycle alone or in company with one another on the motor roads near the pier. Inland between the villages, I often saw grown-ups talking to themselves while riding their bicycle. When I approached and looked closer, I realised they were in fact talking to the kid seated behind them (on the bike). These scenes made me smile and reminded me that the time here progressed at a pace by which one could

feel safe, and that it had not been intruded by a frenzy driven by motor vehicles speeding by without interruption.¹

The fact that cycling is an embodied practice means that progress can be achieved by changes in one's own bodily techniques, even with the use of the same old bicycle on the same small paths. Progress does not mean the invention of newer machines, or the building of more and wider roads only. Rapid mobility is not the only goal people are after either. Slower can be betterment in terms of technical achievements. A slower pace of life also facilitates our interactions with each other and with the environment. The body, emotions and various senses of individuals as subject can be rediscovered, refuting the dominance of the visual and the spectacular.

Furthermore, techniques are not just techniques understood in the narrow scientised and rational sense. There is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself. On the contrary, going over an action again and again enables self-criticism.² As we shall see in Chapter 4, through their daily practice of cycling, residents of Mui Wo conduct a self-dialogue with themselves, constantly reflecting on who they are, the meaning they make of this world, and the social relations they find themselves in. This self-dialogue is only possible when time and space is not compressed.

The use of human-powered vehicles on small paths renders life less convenient by modern standards – transportation is more costly in terms of time, money and physical effort to be spent. This lack of convenience in comparison to metropolitan life makes recycling of materials more commonly practised – it would make more sense to take in a

¹ Fun Yuen, 'History is Like an Excrement Pit: Vegetable Fields are Full of Fertile Soil' (歷史如糞坑·菜園盡肥土), http://www.videopower.hk/articles/articles_15.htm (accessed 25 February 2010). [my translation]

² Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 9-38.

usable sofa that your neighbour abandons beside the rubbish bin than to buy a new one, taking into account the transportation cost and hassle that the latter would engender. During this process, some kind of rapport with neighbours and things is also being built. Waste is no longer something to be disposed of as quickly as possible. As the sofa lingers on the side of the small path, it attracts the attention and eventually action of passers-by. New values can be created in this stage of liminality – while there is no exchange value, potentially there are plenty of use and creative values. Besides municipal waste, local treatment of human waste through the use of the septic tank also brings forth the role of users, a concept that is increasingly being undermined with the emphasis of property ownership and property rights. It is a theme that I am going to explore in Chapter 3.

Such is a glimpse of the tale of Mui Wo, into which I am going to zoom into in this thesis. Yet, the tale has always a larger picture in the background – metropolitan Hong Kong.

ii. The metropolis

They have been going on for a number of years now, and there is not any sign of their arresting or abatement any time soon. I was talking about the works on the waterfront of Central. I do not recall a single day when there was not something under construction or land under reclamation along this portion of Hong Kong Island fronting the Victoria Harbour, ever since I first took up a copywriting job at a surveying firm on Connaught Road Central in 1999. Over the next decade, phase 2 of International Finance Centre, or ‘IFC2’, was completed, overtaking Central Plaza as the tallest building of Hong Kong. Then, IFC2 was surpassed by International Commerce Centre (ICC) on the

opposite side of the harbour in West Kowloon. The General Post Office used to sit at the harbour front; just behind was my office in Jardine House – used to be known as ‘Connaught Centre’, which was described as ‘Hong Kong’s tallest building’ in the textbook that I used in primary school. Now, it just looks dwarfed beside IFC2. From my desk on the tenth floor, I could sometimes see post office workers enjoying the harbour-view on the rooftop of their building. This was not going to last any much longer, since reclamation works began subsequently. The coastline of Hong Kong Island extended yet further again into the harbour. ‘All that is solid melts into air’. By extending the notion of Marx, Marshall Berman rightly noted everything that the capitalist builds is built to be torn down tomorrow, only to be recycled or replaced next week, in the ever ongoing process of searching for more profitable forms.³

Then there are the numerous road works and ‘road diversions’ that they engendered. The latest project concerns the ‘Central - Wan Chai Bypass and Island Eastern Corridor Link’. At an estimated cost of HK\$ 28 billion, its construction work is expected to last for 8 years, until 2017.⁴ In mid 2013, the waterfront remained a giant construction site. ‘We Engineer Hong Kong’s Development’, said a slogan proudly written on the wooden panels enclosing the works, erected by the Civil Engineering and Development Department (CEDD). Of course, there will also be the construction of the Hong Kong section of Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link (the so-called ‘XRL’) with the terminus in West Kowloon. At a cost of more than HK\$60 billion for a 26km railroad – not to mention other costs involved, economic or otherwise,

³ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (London, New York: Verso, 1983).

⁴ Highways Department, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, ‘Central – Wan Chai Bypass and Island Eastern Corridor Link’, 30 November 2012, http://www.hyd.gov.hk/eng/road_and_railway/road_projects/6579th/index.htm (accessed 18 December 2012).

such as the uprooting of entire villages to make way for the railway – the construction of the hi-speed rail, at a first glance, seems to be beyond any economic rationality. Looking more closely, however, it is the involvement of the state in the production of space, linking Hong Kong to major mainland cities at the conceived and symbolic levels, integrating the urban centre of Hong Kong into the national economy. Through the presence of multinational financial institutions at ICC, the economy, both at the local and national levels, is in turn connected to the core of global capitalism. This is an example of how property capital, the state and financial capital weave together in the remaking of urban space in Hong Kong.

Accesses, built for hi-speed rail or motor vehicles, are intimately connected to development. Very early on, the Hong Kong government has already perceived this connection. ‘Roads are the beginning of all development. Build a road, and everything else will follow’: through the words of a senior colonial official in his novel *The Road* written in the 1950s, Austin Coates, who was once District Officer of Lantau Island within the Hong Kong British Administration, told of the consideration behind the construction of roads.⁵ Indeed, since the early colonial days, roads and streets were built as a means to open up new developable sites.⁶ As we shall see in Chapter 5, to our days, roads remain the beginning of all development. The endless road works in Central and the XRL terminus at West Kowloon show that, in response to the exigencies of the capitalistic mode of production, space is organised and rationalised in ways so as to maximise efficiency and to speed up capital value production and social processes in general. The shorter the time of circulation, the faster the capitalist can recuperate

⁵ Austin Coates, *The Road* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 16.

⁶ Roger Nissim, *Land Administration and Practice in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 11.

his/her capital invested in earlier capital value production and social processes, and reinvest it in future ones. The rate of profit can thus be raised; time literally becomes money. To put it in another way, time is only meaningful when it is related to economic production; lived time has disappeared.



(Social) space is a (social) product.⁷ This formulation by Henri Lefebvre is one around which a good part of this thesis is going to revolve. The changes unfolding before me when I was looking out of the window from my desk in the heart of Central spoke much about this concise formulation. The building of roads in the most expensive location to open up developable sites in order to generate revenue, a long-used strategy on the part of the Hong Kong government who has been relying on the grant of land leases as its main source of incomes since the colonial days – promises to live out this formulation in its most literal sense. However, besides this conspicuousness, space above all has been planned and organised to such an extent that it appears to be neutral

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, US: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

and transparent.⁸ The building of more roads to ‘alleviate traffic congestion’⁹ sounds well enough, but as mentioned above, it is intimately related to the strategy of capitalistic development.

Development in the current age of global capitalism is above all the penetration of capital into space. From being the background of commodity production, space itself now stands at the forefront to generate profits; it has become a commodity in its own right. ‘Comparables’ was a jargon my surveyor colleagues often employed to talk about the trade. To carry out a property valuation, surveyors have to identify a comparable, i.e. similar unit on the market to establish the estimate. Looking back, I now realise the term is not only central to the surveying profession, but central also to the tenet of capitalism. Since what counts is exchange value, space has to be comparable, interchangeable and hence homogeneous. As capitalistic development further deepens, the homogeneity of spatial organisation is not limited to the urban core; the logic of capital encroaches upon the rural land as well.

iii. Mui Wo from 1997 to 2013: a unique time and space

If, as noted above, development in the age of global capitalism is characterised by the penetration of capital into space, urban and rural alike, the specificity of Mui Wo lies in the fact that it was spared from the onset of capital for more than a decade starting from the late 1990s.

For nearly five decades after the Second World War, the development of Mui Wo was closely related to its exclusive position as the transport hub of Lantau Island. It was virtually the only connection point between Lantau and the metropolis of Hong Kong

⁸ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 27.

⁹ Highways Department, ‘Central – Wan Chai Bypass and Island Eastern Corridor Link’.

and other outlying islands. People and goods from out of Lantau must pass through Mui Wo to go to the rest of the island, and vice versa. It was the time when the rural town was bustling. However, everything changed at the end of the 1990s when the status of Mui Wo as the only connection point between Lantau and the metropolis of Hong Kong ended with the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge in 1997 and the Tung Chung Mass Transit Railway (MTR) line in 1998, connecting Lantau Island to urban Hong Kong by road for the first time in history. The volume of people and goods passing through Mui Wo dropped abruptly, prompting some local business operators to declare the ‘death’ of Mui Wo. However, more than a decade later, things changed again with the opening of the new Tung Chung Road, which is a modern highway connecting South Lantau and the new town of Tung Chung located in the northern part of the island in 2009, bringing in this time a large number of people belonging to the transnational capitalist class to live in Mui Wo and other parts of South Lantau. This latest development drives house prices and rentals in these areas to unprecedented levels.

From an economic point of view, the more than a decade between 1997 and early 2010s when Mui Wo lost its position as the transport hub of Lantau, was also the time when Mui Wo experienced a ‘downturn’, as retail businesses were slower, and property prices and rentals, especially that of retail premises and holiday homes, experienced significant drops compared to the 1980s.

However, I would argue that this period between 1997 and early 2010s, when fewer goods and people pass through Mui Wo, was also the decade when Mui Wo was spared from the encroachment of capital, since the place did not offer much opportunity for profit-making. What makes the place less attractive to capital, however, makes it

more welcoming to the lower classes. As such, it was also the period when young urbanites, including those who are economically disadvantaged, could find houses at an affordable level and experience a way of living different from what was offered by the metropolis in Mui Wo. It was also this twelve-year period that allowed individual or small group-based artists to reside there and experiment their arts without necessarily the support of substantial resources, financial, social or otherwise. As such, time and space in Mui Wo during this decade was highly unique within the metropolis of Hong Kong, since the development of the place could in many ways be free from the dictate of capital, which did not find much room for profit making there. Space free from capitalistic development is also space for the lived.

If life goes on at a frenzy pace in the metropolis because ‘time is money’, and because capitalists seek to recuperate its capital launched into production in the quickest way possible, life could go back to a much slower pace in Mui Wo. Time, intimately related to economic production in the capitalistic mode of production, became relatively free from the reign of capital in Mui Wo. Lived time, which has disappeared with capitalistic production, re-appeared; such re-appearance of lived time had many implications: people interacted with each other on the basis of emotions and feelings, instead of solely rationalistic and economic considerations. Our body and various senses, which have become insensitive and even ‘useless’ in some cases in modern society, could be opened up again, enabling us to discover new meanings out of space and about ourselves.

Apart from this decade-long ‘break’ from the onset of capital, Mui Wo as a site was equally important to the nurturing of an alternative view on development, as its rural

and agricultural traditions provided a unique cultural setting to residents and artists who have come to live in the place; such traditions, instead of something bygone, are active, actual resources they could draw on to interrogate capitalistic development and its underlying assumptions, and to develop alternative ways of life. This decade starting from the late 1990s might be a decade when Mui Wo was less bustling in economic terms, but it contributed significantly to the development of a more balanced and healthy community that is not axed on economistic considerations only. In escaping from the onset of capital, and the higher house prices and a more frantic pace of life that capital will bring along for more than a decade, Mui Wo provided a site of respiration and gave a chance to the development of a way of living that allow people to (re-)discover the meanings of life on the social, cultural and artistic front.

With the above overview highlighting the specificity of Mui Wo in mind, in the next section, I will discuss in more detail how this specificity is significant in nurturing an alternative way of development.

iv. To cry, or not to cry? Opening of Tsing Ma Bridge



Lantau Island

Located in the south-eastern part of Lantau Island, Mui Wo was an important agricultural base of Hong Kong in the 1950s, when the territory as a whole was not yet highly urbanised. The arrival of a number of residents from Dongguan and other parts of southern China in Mui Wo after 1949 also contributed to an active agricultural scene, as many among them became engaged in farming as a means to support themselves and their families. Rice and vegetable growing in the community was very active at that time. Mui Wo became one of the main vegetable suppliers of Hong Kong, thanks not only to an active farming community, but also to the transport connectivity of Mui Wo. As there were regular ferry services going to Hong Kong Island and other outlying islands such

as Cheung Chau and Peng Chau, vegetables could be transported from Mui Wo to the markets in other parts of Hong Kong by sea early every morning.¹⁰

Indeed, in the eyes of many, the significance of Mui Wo before the 1990s was due to its position as the transport hub of Lantau Island. Indigenous and long-time residents would tell you how the ‘good old days’ were in the 1980s: how the ferries to and from Central were full of passengers, and how the main street in the old town area was full of hawkers and shoppers. Before the 1990s, Lantau Island was connected to Hong Kong and other islands by sea only, and the regular ferry services serving Mui Wo made it an exclusive door to the island.

This position of Mui Wo as the nodal point of transport of Lantau was enhanced by the construction of Shek Pik Reservoir in South Lantau in the 1950s, when the island as a whole was still roadless. As a road was necessary to transport building materials and heavy equipment from Mui Wo to the site in Shek Pik, the reservoir works precipitated the building of a vehicular access linking various main spots like the fishing village of Tai O, Ngong Ping where the famous Po Lin Monastery is located, Cheung Sha which is known for its long and sandy beach, and Mui Wo. This access gave rise to South Lantau Road, the main road connecting the south-western side of Lantau to its south-eastern end, where Mui Wo is located. The original Tung Chung Road linking South Lantau and the north was also open in 1964 as a purpose-built road for water works. In the absence of a road connecting Lantau and urban Hong Kong, to go to various places in Lantau from outside the island in those days, goods and people must first arrive in Mui Wo by sea before they could reach their final destination through the road departing from Mui

¹⁰ Wai-chung Chan Chun-wai Lau, and Cheung-chiu Pang, *Mui Wo* (梅窩) (Hong Kong: Friends of the Country Parks, Cosmos, 2010) , 27 .

Wo.¹¹ Hence was the busy scene in Mui Wo as described by so many long-time residents as mentioned above.

In his book on Lantau Island, Lie Lu, who had been working in Lantau since 1950 and had been consultant for various rural committees of the island, describes Mui Wo as the ‘south-eastern door of Lantau Island’:

After the construction of Shek Pik Reservoir, the road following water supply of the reservoir was converted into a vehicular access of Southwest Lantau. Since then, Mui Wo has become the transport door of Southeast Lantau. The road [from Mui Wo] can reach Tai O, Ngong Ping, and along Tung Chung Road in South Lantau, cross over the mountain and ridge, climb over the mountain range with steep cliffs to reach the new town of Tung Chung. This road is full of dangerous scenes, and each step is treaded with caution. The sea route [of Mui Wo] reaches Hong Kong Island, Cheung Chau, Peng Chau and Discovery Bay directly.

The traffic of Mui Wo was busy, and the scene of prosperity was unprecedented. In the 1980s, [the public housing estate of] Ngan Wan Estate was built [in Mui Wo], bringing in a lot more population. On the side of Mui Wo Ferry Pier are found a number of new buildings to form the atmosphere of a new town. On the other side, the charming beach of Silvermine Bay, and the fields of mountains and villages are so attractive to visitors and tourists that they even forget to leave. To go to Tai O, South Lantau, Ngong Ping and Tung Chung, this [i.e. Mui Wo] is the place that one must pass through. At that time, Mui Wo was indeed bustling with traffic.¹²

¹¹ Chan, Lau and Pang, *Mui Wo*, 27 °

¹² Lie Lu, *Lantau Island* (大嶼山) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2002), 106.

However, the status of Mui Wo as the exclusive door to Lantau ended in the late 1990s, with the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge in 1997 as part of the so-called ‘Airport Core Programme’, which was a series of infrastructure projects surrounding the Hong Kong International Airport built in the same period in North Lantau. For the first time in history, Lantau Island was connected to other parts of Hong Kong by road. Further, in the subsequent year of 1998, the Tung Chung MTR Line opened, making it possible for people to go to the island using the mass transportation system. From then onwards, people do not have to pass through Mui Wo in order to go to other destinations in Lantau. As a result, visitor numbers to Mui Wo dropped substantially. Lu expresses his regrets for the place in his book:

There was a time when Tsing Ma Bridge was not yet built, and Mui Wo was the point that people must pass through in going to and from Lantau Island. To tour around the waterside community of Tai O, enjoy the snow-like beach of Cheung Sha, pay respect to the Big Buddha at Po Lin Monastery, people came [to Mui Wo] en masse; each time a ferry arrived [at the pier], buses would depart [from the pier] and the flows never stopped. That was the golden age of Mui Wo. Now that the airport is in operation, the Bridge is open for traffic, Mui Wo which is located on the south-eastern side of Lantau is no longer comparable to the old days. How can she regain her grace of the past?¹³

This sentiment of regret was echoed in a television programme broadcast in 2006 which we will discuss shortly. However, as we shall see, the connection of Lantau by road to the metropolis, leading to the drop in the number of people visiting Mui Wo

¹³ Lu, *Lantau Island*, 111 °

formed only the backdrop to these sorrowful feelings for the place; it was the economic consequence – the drop in property prices that was the true concern.

In August 2006, TVB, a local television channel in Hong Kong, aired a documentary *The Dead City of Mui Wo* (梅窩死城) in a prime-time news programme. The documentary portrayed Mui Wo as an abandoned, forgotten corner in the increasingly bustling Lantau Island. In contrast to Disneyland, the Giant Buddha and the new town of Tung Chung, Mui Wo appeared deserted in the programme, with only a few residents and visitors. With solemnity, the programme host asked more than once: ‘Would Mui Wo be resurrected?’

Resurrection. And so the place was pronounced dead. In the documentary, as a further proof to support the argument that Mui Wo was ‘dead’, the reporter interviewed Mr Yip, a holiday home owner cum operator in Mui Wo. According to the operator, one holiday flat could easily command HK\$1,000 per night on weekends in the 1980s, and advanced booking was necessary. At the time of the interview in 2006, holidaymakers could walk in anytime and rent a room at HK\$400-500 per night. Apart from the drop in visitors, Mr Yip blamed worse business on keener competition from rival operators. He said, ‘people bought these flats in the hope of re-sale at a good price, but they couldn’t do so. They couldn’t occupy so many houses themselves, and so they refurbished them into holiday houses.’ These ‘people’ referred to by Mr Yip are what I would call ‘speculators’, whose motto is ‘buy low, sell high’ in order to reap a profit, the higher the better. This is the core spirit of capitalism. In the process, the speculators would build up scarce goods in their ‘reserves’, more than they need for use (one cannot occupy so many houses, as pointed out by Mr Yip), as what they are really interested in is their

exchange value (re-sale at a good price, as told by Mr Yip). As a result, when things do not happen in the way as they wish, it becomes a problem – only it is framed as a problem of Mui Wo receiving too few visitors, or rents being too low, but not as a problem of property speculation.

Likewise, in an interview with Wong Fuk-kan, the district councillor of Mui Wo, that appeared in *Sing Tao Daily* dated 5 March 2006, a list of facts were presented in support of the argument that Mui Wo has become a ‘dead city’,¹⁴ a term that was coined by Wong and was subsequently adopted as the title of the TVB documentary. On top of the list was the drop of retail rentals. According to the report, the monthly rent for a 400-sqft cooked food stall managed by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department dropped to around HK\$5,000 in 2006, the time of the reportage, from more than HK\$10,000 in 2000. Another ‘proof’ cited by the paper was the fact that most banks did not approve mortgage loans for properties purchased in Mui Wo.

In other words, both the TVB documentary and the *Sing Tao Daily* report used property values to gauge the health of Mui Wo. If property prices are up, the place is alive. If they are down, the place is dead. This rise and fall of property prices is in turn related to the road. Among other facts contributing to the death of Mui Wo as cited by the *Sing Tao* report was a 5% drop in the number of ferry passengers commuting between Mui Wo and Central. The drop in ferry passengers going to Mui Wo was due to the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge in 1997, linking Lantau Island to urban Hong Kong for the first time and ending the status of the ferry as the only transport option for visitors going to Lantau. However, the road was only the main factor leading to the core of

¹⁴Li-chan Lu, ‘Mui Wo to Solicit Million to Build Tourist-Targeted Silver Bauhinia’ (梅窩籌百萬建銀紫荊吸旅客), *Sing Tao Daily*, 5 March 2006.

concern for those who pronounced the ‘death’ of Mui Wo – to Messrs Wong and Yip, it is property prices that determine the life and death of the place. This leads us to the question of how space becomes subjected to the logic of capitalistic production; in the age of finance capitalism, space becomes the core economic sector.

In fact, given a key feature of finance capitalism is deterritorialisation, one of the ironies is that the privileged form of speculation today is that of land and city space.¹⁵ Capitalism has taken possession of the land, and mobilized it to the point where this sector is fast becoming central. Space in its entirety enters the modernised capitalist mode of production, to be used for the generation of surplus value.¹⁶ Following this logic, space loses its *raison d’être* if it fails to generate surplus value for landlords or speculators, and hence the laments of Messrs Wong and Yip.

Going back to the TVB documentary, the word ‘dead’, or ‘dying’ (死) in the title *The Dead City of Mui Wo* (梅窩死城) is modifying the noun ‘city’ (城). In other words, Mui Wo is dying, or even dead by the standards of urbanisation, which is intimately related to the modernised capitalist mode of production. Lefebvre has noted that industrialisation - urbanisation is a dual process, with the former inducing the latter.¹⁷ As we shall see in Chapter 2, urbanisation and the development of new towns in Hong Kong were also responses to the demands of industrialisation in the post Second World War years. As capitalistic societies undergo economic and social transformations, these also result in changes in spatial organisation. We shall see further below that the phenomenon of gentrification, also witnessed in Mui Wo, is notably the spatial

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), 153-154.

¹⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 335 - 347.

¹⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 65.

consequence of deep transformations in highly developed capitalistic societies and the globalisation of finance capitalism.

To Wong the district councillor, or Yip the holiday home operator, Mui Wo died after the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge, leading to the drop in the number of visitors coming to Mui Wo and most importantly, the fall in property prices. However, to many others, Mui Wo was far from dead after the opening of the bridge. Well on the contrary, it was very much alive, though in an entirely different way as imagined by Wong or Yip: the drop in the number of tourists going through Mui Wo and the consequent drop in rentals offered a unique opportunity for users of space to come and settle in the place. Young urbanites without much money or a strong social network could have the chance to experience and experiment a way of life which is, as we shall see throughout this thesis, in many ways unique as compared to metropolitan life. The drop in tourist number also allowed the experiment of more diverse uses of retail space, i.e. instead of catering for tourists like eateries or stores selling souvenirs, other uses intended for local residents could be developed. In this way, both newcomers and original residents could benefit from these mutual exchanges, opening up themselves to new kinds of experiences. A road that has blocked the way of capital to Mui Wo on the one hand, paved an alternative path for the lower classes on the other hand.

In the year 2000, Yun and Gale, who were both recent graduates of the Academy for Performing Arts (APA) and from a lower class family background, moved to Mui Wo with only a little money in their pocket in the hope of seeking a way of life different from what is offered by urban Hong Kong.

When we were about to graduate, my female partner at that time yearned very much to leave her public housing [home] unit, which was surrounded by high-rises and made her depressed. As for me, I hoped to have a space as my workshop such that it would be easier to make small to medium-sized props, but also to try the taste of ‘life of two’. One day, the two of us visited the countryside of Lantau to make ourselves feel better and in this way, we discovered Mui Wo. From then onwards, I did not want to leave the place anymore.¹⁸

In this way, two young people from a modest social background could gain their independence and start a life on their own in a place that they liked. In addition to getting a new life experience out of Mui Wo, the two also brought their own experiences and skills to the place. One of their initiatives was to open a shop to sell self-made art products. Later, they also offered inexpensive painting and craft classes to local children within this space.

After living in Mui Wo for a year, my female partner insisted on moving from [the village of] Luk Tei Tong to [the old town of] Chung Hau Street. The front portion of the premises was used for retail, and the back portion for domestic use. We sold pottery artwork that we made ourselves, as well as factory-made candles and incenses. I did not have much confidence in opening a shop to do business, nor did I have the capital or interest. However, I accompanied my female partner to go through this time period out of my affection for her. We took up the entire responsibility of carrying out the interior design and decoration of the shop, and the installation of shop shelves. Besides selling a small amount of goods, we tried

¹⁸ Yun , ‘Forward Looking at Middle Age, Creation through Labour Work’(中年前望· 勞動原創) , <http://wp.me/pVWtZ-uj> (accessed 15 June 2013).

to offer painting and handicraft classes at low fees to local children, and open up the private spaces of our home – bedroom, sitting room and working area, experiencing together with the kids handicraft materials and methods which they had not been exposed to at school.¹⁹

In this way, the drop in retail rents after the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge allowed young people like Yun and Gale to open a shop and offer low-fee classes to local kids. The paths of two young women, who had spent until then all of their life in urban areas, and that of kids born and bred in Mui Wo, were able to cross with each other within the shop space and Mui Wo at large. Private and public space at their shop is intertwined. Kids coming for classes could have their activity within the private domestic space, including the bedroom and sitting room. Behind this generosity and flexibility of Yun and Gale, is a kind of interpersonal relation that goes beyond utilitarianism, and that is built on a mutual interest (experiencing together handicraft materials and methods). This mix of public-private sphere also prompts us to reflect on the public-private dualism, which has been taken for granted in modern capitalist society, but is in fact a product of industrialisation, when economic production became an activity taking place in the factory or office and separated from the domestic sphere. I have mentioned at the beginning of the chapter that Mui Wo is attractive to some for its mixture of private and public spheres. Some studies also show that it is in the Chinese shop floor culture that the private and the public interweave: if small shop owners in certain old districts of Hong Kong are accused of occupying public space by displaying goods beyond their private shop floor, often they also open up their retail shop space to the public. For instance, they would offer seats for *Kaifongs*, i.e. people living in the neighbourhood to

¹⁹ Yun, 'Forward Looking at Middle Age, Creation through Labour Work'.

come and have a chat under their roof.²⁰ In the wet market of Mui Wo, some stall owners will offer a stool or two for shoppers to be seated within their stall or the public space for a casual chat. This is an important opportunity for gossips or general information exchanges. On a number of occasions, I also benefited from this courtesy offered by Ah Fong, the fruit stall operator. One of the prerequisites for this casualness is the ability to use space at low cost – if rents are high, it will not be a surprise that shop owners would make use of every inch of the rented space to generate revenues.

This culture of public-private mix is at odds with the modern concept of the separation of the public from the private. In the case of Mui Wo, this lack of distinction between public and private spheres has led to conflicts when more newcomers taking private property for granted are arriving to settle in Mui Wo. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, at least two problems would arise. First, some people do not take up user responsibilities outside their private home, when the daily life of Mui Wo assumes the practice of such responsibilities to function properly. Second, the livelihood of some locals becomes at stake because they are suddenly accused of occupying ‘public’ space for their income earning activity.

Apart from letting kids use their private space, Yun and Gale also made use of the public space in front their shop to do something very unique even to this day: staging a puppet show.

One of the more interesting activities was the cooperation among my female partner, I and a few friends in Mui Wo who also liked arts. We staged a puppet

²⁰ See, for instance, the study on Chun Yeung Street, a popular wet market in North Point by Kin Wai Siu, ‘A Decolourised Community: Chun Yeung Street under Urban Renewal Plan’ (褪色的社區：都市重建計劃下的春秧街), in *Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity*, ed. Ngai Pun and Lai-Man Yee (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2003), 361-392.

show in front of our shop. It was a story about [Doggie Ah Wong] riding on a bike to visit his old grandma living uphill in Mui Wo. The making of the puppets and painting of the backdrop were done by us working together.²¹



Residents watching a puppet show in the old town of Mui Wo

(Source: Yun, 'Forward Looking at Middle Age, Creation through Labour Work' (中年前望・勞動原創), <http://wp.me/pVWtZ-uj>)

The scene of residents gathering in front of Yun's shop in the old town of Mui Wo to watch a performance of puppet show was undoubtedly a very unique and special occasion. It was impressive enough to look at the picture more than ten years later: the old town has not known too many days like this besides the daily activities of shoppers going to shop at one of the grocery stores or customers eating at the tea cafés. It was a chance for the originally urban-based, young artists to use their talents and skills, from making the puppets, creating the backdrop to staging the performance in a place they adopted as their new home. Meanwhile, young kids in Mui Wo had a taste of a form of art that they normally might not have access to. Despite this unfamiliarity of the form,

²¹ Yun. 'Forward Looking at Middle Age, Creation through Labour Work'.

the performance represented a very local, daily life experience, something the audience could easily relate to. As Yun recounted, one of the excitements for the kids was to be able to touch the plush puppets with their own hands in addition to watching the performance. The distance between the audience and the performers and performance itself was very close.



Kids at the puppet show: ‘The happiest thing is to be able to touch the puppet as well as watching the show’

(Source: Yun, ‘Forward Looking at Middle Age, Creation through Labour Work’ (中年前望・勞動原創), <http://wp.me/pVWtZ-uj>)

This exchange between the artists and the local kids was very lively. It shows that Mui Wo, after the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge, was not dead at all. On the contrary, the fall in rents and a slower pace of life gave a chance to the development of new experiences, including the public staging of the art form of puppet show and cultural exchanges between people whose paths could cross in this specific time and space. Perhaps more importantly, both sides – the artists and the audience – were from the non-privileged classes, and the performance and exchanges happened without any subvention of the government or any groups. The opening of Tsing Ma Bridge drove tourist

numbers and property rents (or behind this, capital) in Mui Wo to new lows – something bemoaned by the district councillor and holiday home operators, but it was also this absence of capital and its exigencies that left open a space to allow the artists, who had only a few resources, to stage a unique, grassroots- and local-based arts performance on the rural fringe of the metropolis, somewhere which is neglected and even looked down upon by cultural elites.

However, instead of a constraint, the lack of resources on the part of the artists constitutes an awareness to create and approach arts in a way that is non-wasteful and friendly to the environment. At APA, Yun was a student of props making, which, in her own words, is probably at the ‘bottom end of the performing arts sector’. Yun notes that most of the time, she enjoys the props making process, using her intuition and senses to create things that can be used, appreciated, or both. This is why she will not easily discard materials that can be recycled in the future. Her experiences with the ‘standard’ ways of arts production at APA have undoubtedly reinforced this practice of hers:

Once, when I was walking past the rubbish collection area at the back of the academy, I found that the backdrops for a performance just finished in the theatre were discarded there. Those grand pieces, which students from the Scenic Art section used a lot of time and effort to paint, were all torn up, lying in the rubbish site. All the bolts, wheels and screws were still tightly fastened onto the backdrops. I unfastened them all and took them away with me.

After this shocking discovery, I often tour around rubbish points to see whether there are ‘treasures’ being discarded. I have also become aware of the fact that a large amount of resources on earth are depleted behind arts production. In the

making of props, wood, metal, all kinds of plastics, fabric and foams are materials that are regularly used. This makes me wonder: is it a must that all brilliant productions require large amounts of resources? If large amount of resources are depleted to make a bad production, what is the point?²²

After this instance, Yun was probably more convinced of her approach of making use of unwanted materials for her artistic creations. I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that the relatively low accessibility of Mui Wo compared to the metropolis (which in many ways is *too* convenient) makes recycling more widely practised in this Lantau community. Unwanted things, especially heavy ones, sometimes lie on the sidewalk for days, inviting potential users to take them home. Yun's arts practice is a good match with the place. We shall see in Chapter 3 that a few years later, Yun was to create an innovative art installation with a practical purpose in a communal garden of Mui Wo, using materials discarded by her neighbour. In this way, over the course of years, Mui Wo saw the development of an independent artist who has gradually nurtured her own ways in her arts practice and thinking.

The shop of Yun and Gale ran for about one year. Yun later met Fun, who moved next to her house in Mui Wo, and together they were to take up the operation of Video Power (VP), an independent video arts group. Mui Wo was the place where the group could develop a form to embody their philosophy on arts and life:

In Mui Wo, the cost of living and creation is not high. The natural environment is in itself very amusing to us, and full of exciting discoveries. With the 'natural enjoyment' that comes in free of charge, consumer products filling the metropolis have thus become unnecessary. This community supplies basic foodstuffs and

²² Yun, 'Forward Looking at Middle Age, Creation through Labour Work'.

groceries, and one can even have fresh vegetables from local farms. Eating out occasionally with friends at eateries in Chung Hau Street or the pier will not tighten up our finances. Rents have not yet gone up those few years. If one does not always chase after the illusory material world and buy this or that, we are having a pretty good life with HK\$60,000 a year.

This amount of HK\$60,000 refers to the ‘artistic subsistence grant’ experimented by VP, which allocated this sum of money to support the living expenses of an artist for a year out of the one-year Development Grant given out by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) after fulfilling its contracted projects. By the standard of metropolitan Hong Kong, this amount of living expenses for a person for a whole year is far from anything extravagant, all the more so when the artists did not have other incomes. However, with this innovative but controversial idea of artistic subsistence grant on the part of VP integrated in the space and time of Mui Wo, an extraordinary environment for artists became reality. On top of this, VP also rented a workshop in Kau Tsuen, one of the more remote villages in Mui Wo, to provide free accommodation and creative space for artists from grassroots backgrounds, including free use of computers, video cameras, internet access, and utilities such as water and electricity. A piece of small-house land standing ‘idle’ next to VP’s workshop, upon seeking permission by the VP artists from the landlord, was also developed into the communal garden and compost pit of the village. A veteran arts practitioner used the word ‘luxury’ twice to describe VP’s conditions when she visited the group in the capacity of ADC assessor.²³

It is indeed highly unusual for grassroots artists to enjoy such an environment, especially in the context of Hong Kong. Even one has the money, it would be difficult to

²³ Yun, ‘Forward Looking at Middle Age, Creation through Labour Work’.

have access to a fully-equipped workspace for arts creation, as well as a 700 square-foot open garden – and hence the comments by the aforementioned arts practitioner. It took a number of factors and more importantly, *time* to achieve this hard-earned development. VP started its experimental projects in Mui Wo in 2007 when it officially received a grant from HKADC for its Mui-Wo based project, until 2010 when it decided to stop applying for funding from HKADC. The two core members, Yun and Fun, carried on with their creation until summer 2013. In 2011, they stopped renting VP's workshop due to, among others, rising rents. If we counted the groundwork started by the two, their work in Mui Wo could be traced way back to the year 2000, when Yun moved to Mui Wo and started her practice of arts there as discussed above. As mentioned, this was precisely the period when Mui Wo was able to spare itself from the onset of capital due to the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge, or the loss of the status of Mui Wo as the gateway to Lantau Island. This has driven rents to new lows. Also, all small house land was not used for house development and some were left idle.

However, at the end of the day, all indigenous residents would not allow their small house land to be developed into a garden by users for free even if the land stands idle for years. Relations between people play a crucial part. As we shall see in Chapter 5, the indigenous resident who allowed his land to be developed as a communal garden by VP in the village of Kau Tsuen was a special character, who would watch the stars at night and play *Erhu*, a Chinese string instrument, in front of his house, all the while staying a little bit drunk. It was during one of his star watching nights that he came to speak with Fun for the first time; later, when she asked, he let her use his plot of land without any hesitation.

Likewise, low rents could only be a necessary condition for Mui Wo to become a nurturing ground for alternative arts. There must be something in Mui Wo that attracted grassroots artists, and groups like VP to base themselves in this rural fringe of the Hong Kong metropolis in the first place. Indeed, this decision of VP's has drawn criticisms from social activists, accusing the group of retreating from the frontline of urban-based activism. I asked Fun, the main personage of VP who took over its operations in 2007, as to why Mui Wo was the site chosen by the group. In her words, Mui Wo is attractive for its 'nothingness', and yet 'there is a lot behind this nothingness'. I understand this seemingly contradictory stance to be the distinction between the spectacle and the lived. For instance, compared to Tai O on the western side of Lantau, Mui Wo seems to have nothing spectacular to offer. There is no eye-catching sight like the stilt houses in Tai O. Nor are there any festivities that can satisfy the curious eye. Anthropologists Tik-sang Liu and Siu-woo Cheung recounted that when they first carried out their field study in Tai O in the 1980s, they were immediately attracted by the colourful dragon boat activities there.²⁴ Today, the dragon boat water parade in Tai O during the Dragon Boat Festival has become a major tourist attraction. As for Mui Wo, Hung Shing Festival, perhaps the most important local festival which is to pay tribute to a deity protecting the sea, is of a much lower profile and largely a local event for residents.²⁵

²⁴ Siu-woo Cheung and Tik-sang Liu, *Hong Hong Regional History, Series Two: Tai O* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2006), v.

²⁵ In 2010, the organising committee of the Hung Shing Festival applied for funding from the government-sponsored Mega Events Fund to promote the festival 'internationally'. Many activities were held around the festival with the aim of attracting 42,000 people. The festivities did manage to attract a lot of people to Mui Wo, but I also heard a lot of complaints from restaurant owners that they had a hard time in serving so many people. Rumours also had it that local businesses could not really make money out of the events and so they were not interested in supporting a 'mega' Hung Shing Festival again. I could not confirm this saying but there is no more word of a 'mega' festival ever since. Hung Shing Festival has become a local and modest event again.

The coverage that Mui Wo receives in the literature reflects this impression of ‘nothingness’. In Lu’s 140-page book on Lantau Island that I discussed earlier, more than 40 pages are devoted to Tai O, and 20 pages are on Po Lin Monastery; Mui Wo receives a mere 6-page attention. As I have mentioned, most of his discussions focus on the status of Mui Wo as the transport hub of Lantau Island.

However, while Mui Wo has virtually nothing spectacular to offer to the visitor (which is by the way, one main reason why the government is to give it a ‘facelift’ to attract more visitors), many residents would agree it is a good place for living – due to, among others, its slow pace of life and casualness as reflected by the cycling culture as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, its melange of the private and public which means relations between people are more open, and its natural environment with a sandy beach, farmlands, and village houses scattered throughout a spacious environment. It is also home to a diverse range of living species co-habiting with human beings, including those who would remind people of Mui Wo’s farming traditions, like the cattle and buffaloes. The lack of spectacle in Mui Wo is precisely also what makes it modest, and hence attractive as a place to call home. In fact, in a way, the place is blessed with the lack of eye-catching sights or spectacular festivities, which, as we have seen in many other places, are already very much commodified in order to attract tourists and their money. Instead of being tied to the spectacular, the focus of development Mui Wo is based on local life and experiences. Life follows a rhythm closely attuned to the local environment, and gradually a marginal but unique way of life is being developed on the fringe of the metropolis of Hong Kong. After the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge, though Mui Wo became less busy, it has always remained home to a few thousand inhabitants

of all ages, from the elderly, middle-aged, young kids to the newly born. In many ways, it is a vibrant community – it suffices to go to the wet market or dim sum restaurants in the morning to see how daily activities carry on with vigour. If some residents move out permanently, many of whom belonging to the younger generation of indigenous residents, some others move into the community at the same time, including myself, who moved to Mui Wo in 2005 after spending the whole of my life living in urban areas.

To VP, arts and life are not two separate domains but integrated. This is why Mui Wo as a unique place for living is important for the development of their arts. As mentioned above, their working conditions were described as a ‘luxury’ by the HKADC assessor, but money alone cannot explain the story. By definition, luxury is something desirable but costly or difficult to obtain.²⁶ The HK\$60,000 that VP allocated to its artists as their only source of living expenses for a whole year can hardly be called costly by the living standards of Hong Kong. The extraordinary working environment is possible because the place of Mui Wo, together with its nature, farm fields, living organisms, and people constituted a good place for living, and at the same time provided a lot of inspiration to their creative work. It is true that not many people are able to appreciate or enjoy this kind of life that Mui Wo provides even though they would agree it is ‘desirable’ – and hence, I believe, the abovementioned ‘luxury’ comment. However, this is the case because people have ‘no time’, or more precisely, their time is used for economic production or consumption. In this way, the time for enjoying pleasures in life becomes ever less if not totally disappeared. Also, Yun used her craft skills to build up the infrastructure of VP’s workshop and the communal garden using recycled materials and used items donated by others. Instead of being used in wage-earning activity, her

²⁶ *The Penguin Complete English Dictionary* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

time and skills were used for the creation of a space for artistic and living purposes. If the arts and working environment of VP constitute a ‘luxury’, it is not because they are costly or that the members are privileged (all the core members are from a lower class background), but because too many people in our society are bounded by economic production and consumption, and hence, ironically, they cannot obtain and enjoy the simple pleasures that come in totally free of charge, but that need time to cultivate (for instance, building up equal relations with people living in the same community). At this point, we may ask: why pleasures as simple and basic as the nature or sharing of joy with other people have become luxurious in our society? In this sense, VP’s work on the fringe of the metropolis is like a critical reflection, telling us something is wrong with our society.

In their daily life, VP members also engaged themselves in recycling waste and collecting kitchen residues. According to Yun and Fun, some artists living in Mui Wo also do these things, but the main difference is that they do not link artistic creations with their living and working environment; the two remain separate. Yun recounted one day, another HKADC assessor visited them in Mui Wo. While the assessor tried hard to understand VP’s arts, she categorically rejected their collection of kitchen residues as something related to arts. To sum up this experience, Yun thought that for those artists, artistic creation is ‘work’ and ‘production’, whereas waste recycling and collection of kitchen scraps belong to ways of life or ideals.²⁷ However, to VP, how they live out their daily life is also an integral part of their arts.

As such, to the arts group, Mui Wo offered a unique space and time where alternative arts and social development is possible. In the words of Fun, it is a place for

²⁷ Yun, ‘Forward Looking at Middle Age, Creation through Labour Work’.

the ‘well-being of body and mind’, with a rhythm of life more in accord with nature and human needs, instead of revolving exclusively around economic production; only under such circumstances can social development and arts development be possible. To them, an artist is to stand on an extremely marginal position and act as a ‘mirror’ to reflect on the wider society such that people can see what is going wrong. As such, the artist is also actively engaged in social movement:

[One form of social movement can be] the revolution of life that Yun and I had tried to live out in Mui Wo over the past few years: at a time when semiocapital has taken charge of various corners in society, and when everyone is obsessed with his/her mediated self, [we] stood on the marginal, got in touch with reality, lived out a holistic life, and thus became a mirror of society, enabling the society to realise its limitations, backwardness, shortcomings and darkness. Only in this way can the society have a chance to progress.²⁸

The marginal position of Mui Wo in geographical and cultural terms allowed the arts philosophy of VP to take a concrete form; the rural and agricultural traditions of Mui Wo and its natural environment provided them with resources to experiment their arts and ways of living that were not governed by the logic of capital. They were to stage a social movement in the sense of changing life. I will discuss the arts of the group in the community in more details in Chapter 5.

v. Alternative Development in the Age of Global Capitalism

If the destructions and constructions that I witnessed in Central over the course of ten years are by now ‘common sense’ and epitomise development in the era of global

²⁸ Fun in her comments to tufuling, ‘Again On Occupying Central’ (續寫占領中環), <http://wp.me/pVWtZ-12p> (accessed 24 June 2013).

capitalism, how should I make sense of the somewhat ‘uncommon’ development of Mui Wo over the course of the same period and beyond? Although there are signs that capital is penetrating the space of Mui Wo, in many ways, life in Mui Wo stands in contrast with metropolitan Hong Kong. As mentioned above, road works seem to be never ending in metropolitan Hong Kong, with the aim of speeding up circulation of goods and people. Yet, a lot of places in Mui Wo are still accessible by small paths only and are closed to motor vehicles. As we shall see in Chapter 4, in an epoch when virtually every effort is made to shorten the time of circulation, slowness can be affirmed as a measure of progress via the daily, embodied practice of cycling in Mui Wo. If space is annihilated through time,²⁹ then both space and time will re-appear when we slow down. Lived experiences would be able to re-surface. In this case, growth and development can be achieved through lived experiences and lived time, in terms of progressing from immaturity to maturity, instead of gauging growth against quantitative measurements or economic gains only. I am going to discuss this theme in Chapter 5 through the work of Video Power, the Mui Wo-based video arts group that I have mentioned in the previous section.

Even as the government intervenes to centralise spatial management and to make space homogeneous, self-management at the local level still plays an important role in Mui Wo, so much so it is sometimes able to resist development imposed top-down and to maintain a place of ‘dirt’, a term understood here in the sense proposed by Mary Douglas, i.e. dirt as something out of place in a system but has the potential to generate new values.³⁰ While the preoccupation with exchangeability means that values are often

²⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge Ma and Oxford UK: Blackwell, 1990), 205.

³⁰ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

reduced to the question of ‘How much?’, play, use and the creative are very much present in daily life in Mui Wo. Space is experienced as an *oeuvre* instead of an economic product. While property ownership is equated with rights and responsibilities under the spirit of capitalism, user rights and responsibilities are still embedded in the culture of Mui Wo.

If what is unfolding in Central represents the dominant form of development, is it the only royal path that we could follow? Is there anything that Mui Wo can inform the larger metropolis? The point is not to argue for the conservation of Mui Wo as a ‘protected zone’ whatsoever. Rather, the place is invoked as a site of rural-urban encounter that provides us with insights as to how to interrogate the different assumptions and values underlying capitalistic development, and to bring forth implications to the wider society based on its uniqueness.

With the universal penetration of capital into space, be it rural or urban, the crisis today is homogeneity, or the drive towards homogeneity. To ensure the reproduction of the relations of domination, the space thus produced is characterised by sameness, implying interchangeability of places and even of time. To render space interchangeable, a powerful centralisation is required.³¹ This implies a centre-periphery relation. Urban-rural, or centre-periphery interactions have always been going on in the context of urban Hong Kong and Mui Wo. However, while the urban core is dominant, the urban-rural is in a dialectical relationship. The rural as marginal culture has its own negotiations to make. Revolution will bring along the urban, with revolution being understood in the sense of ‘Change Life!’, to borrow Lefebvre’s formulation. However, where do the

³¹ Henri Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, ed., Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 243.

driving forces of revolution come from? How can life be changed? Instead of something bygone, the rural as culture is very much alive. In the era of globalisation, the rural has its revolutionary potential and the ability to contest the ideologies of capitalism. Rural residents are not a group of passive, 'innocent' people, nor are they entirely at another extreme, being greedy and ignoring the well-being of their native land, requiring the intervention of urban elites to take over and protect the 'rural' environment according to the latter's imaginary. The rural is varied, and not all about an idyllic and pastoral way of life.³² It constitutes in fact a heterogeneous, culturally diverse community, sometimes even more so than the urban core. The urban-rural is not a dichotomy, above all not a dynamic-static dichotomy.

Since Mui Wo is a meeting point of the urban, global and rural, can Mui Wo be seen as a site of contesting values where it is possible to interrogate the assumptions underlying capitalistic development, and eventually leading to an alternative path of development? First, the study is to argue that there is not one royal path leading to development; and second, it is to suggest the possibility of pursuing development that is not governed by capital.

My project here is to examine how development in its dominant form, characterised by professionalisation and state bureaucratisation and further propelled by forces of globalisation, is shaping our rural and urban areas according to the interests and demands of capital. 'Development' in its predominant sense under global capitalism is to provide a place with the necessary facilities, signs and symbols, such that its entirety is endowed with exchange value. I see the on-going, government-led development in Mui Wo as the continuing process to include space in the modernised

³² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 292-298.

mode of capitalist production. Nevertheless, again referring to the case of Mui Wo, I will argue that the rural, though at every risk of peril, is not dead – far from being so, it is rather very much alive. The rural exhibits in many aspects a form of marginal culture instead of a matter of the past. With the hegemonic onset of financial capitalism and globalisation, both the urban and the rural are facing changes and challenges. The meaning lies not in ‘preserving’ the rural as something stagnant and fixed, but in acknowledging it as something lived and living. The ultimate purpose is to instil the elements of reform and revolution into society at large, urban and rural included:

Change Life!

Without attempting to give it a fixed definition – as I do not treat it as a fixed concept, the term ‘rural’, when used as a geographical concept in this thesis, generally refers to habitations where small groups of people sparsely occupy rather large territories.³³ It is also always used in a sense relative to the urban core. This at once distinguishes it from the urban core where both the size and density of population are high. The rural also distinguishes itself in its ways of life. Rural residents sustain themselves – or preserve in part the tradition of sustaining themselves – out of what they can find in the environs. As the saying goes: ‘when in the hills, live off the hills; when on water, live off the water’ (靠山吃山，靠水吃水), a culture of self-reliance and self-sufficiency is implied. The small size of population also means that most daily affairs can be handled and disputes settled directly among the inhabitants themselves. In contrast, the sheer size of urban population often renders it necessary to have a third party to manage daily affairs and settle disputes. As we shall see in Chapter 3 and

³³ Kevin Archer, *The City: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

Chapter 5, as a result of the moving in of more urbanites and in particular the transnational capitalist class to Mui Wo, this contrast has led to an increase in government agents intervening in daily life – as a ‘service provider’ but also as a form of state power.

I also use the word ‘rural’ in the cultural sense throughout this thesis: it is the rural as culture, and the feedback of values implied in the rural periphery to the urban core that I am trying to explore in this thesis. There are at least two implications here. First, I do not view history as a linear process – or progress for that matter – as implied by the notion ‘from rural to urban’, or similarly ‘from village to city’, as if the rural or the village were thing of the past due to the dominant process of industrialisation-urbanisation. As Ho-fung Hung points out in his study of Tanka people in Tai O, the dualistic opposition of metropolis/rural village and modernity/tradition forms the basis of modernity and metropolitanism. History is presented as the inevitable process of moving from tradition to modernity, and the taking over of rural villages by the metropolis. In Hong Kong, this is represented as the myth of a fishing village transforming itself into a metropolis.³⁴ However, as mentioned above, the rural as culture is alive, though marginal, even in today’s times when Hong Kong as a whole is highly urbanised. Total urbanisation or disappearance of the village is not an inevitable historical process. In a collection of papers studying ‘the development of Hong Kong from before 1842 to recent years’, the editors, while giving it the title *From village to*

³⁴ Ho-fung Hung, ‘One Thousand Years of Suppression; One Thousand Years of Resistance: the Dan People Before and After Colonialism’ (千年的壓迫、千年的抵抗：殖民主義前後的大澳蛋族). In *Who’s City*, ed. Wing-sang Law (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997), 114-115.

city, acknowledge that village life is continued in various ways as the city developed.³⁵ The rural has its own negotiations and feedback to make at any given point in time.

Second, the implication of viewing rural as culture instead of through economic rationality (e.g. agriculture as ‘industry’) is that the value of the rural is affirmed in its marginality and residual quality. Its marginality is what makes it a critical reflection on the urban core, informing us that life as is experienced in the urban is not an inevitable destiny. There are indeed alternatives if we can extend our horizons and go beyond an economic rationality. Often, agriculture and the rural seem to be readily cancelled out, precisely because economic rationality has been used to quantify the value of different priorities in life. Even some activists in Hong Kong striving to preserve the rural inadvertently fall into a capitalist logic by arguing for the significance of the rural based on the production value of the agricultural industry.³⁶ However, no matter how one calculates the market worth of agriculture, it can never be compared to that of finance or real estate in Hong Kong. This is exactly the reason why one time after another, in the production of space to realise the maximum surplus value possible, agriculture is being uprooted to make way for other ‘higher value’ sectors or infrastructure in support of them. Furthermore, following the economic rationality, something is not ‘worthwhile’ at all if it is not related to any industry or production (and hence no economic value). In this way, a tree has no value at all if it will not end up being sold or transformed into a

³⁵ Alan Birch, David Faure and James Hayes, *From Village to City – Studies in the traditional roots of Hong Kong society* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1984), viii.

³⁶ See for instance Local Research Society, *New Territories Farmers who are not Rightly Compensated – Policy Research on Green Bud Compensation in the New Territories* (First draft) (不正償的新界農民—新界青苗補償政策研究 (初稿)). Paper presented at ‘Who master the rise and fall of Hong Kong Agriculture’ Colloquium (「香港農業誰主浮沉」研討會), Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 16 January 2011; or proposals by Hong Kong Sustainable Agriculture Association, which is one of the most active organizations calling for the preservation of the agricultural industry in Hong Kong.

commodity. This is why 'nature' is so easily given away to economic considerations. By going beyond an economic-centred view and affirming the rural as culture, it is hoped that we will be able to see other horizons and alternatives. In the face of urbanisation and globalisation, the rural as culture, together with its underlying values, is feeling the impact. It may mean that the rural is being sidelined and marginalised, but it does not mean that it is dead. It is precisely in the marginal can we see hope, as it offers a critical reflection on the dominant. To see the rural as culture is to recognise the multiplicity and heterogeneity of culture. Instead of something fossilised, from its peripheral position the rural is constantly engaged in dynamic dialogues with the urban core.

Mui Wo has been changing over the past few decades as a result of political and socio-economic transformations in Hong Kong and South China, and has been negotiating with different forces, from immigrants from the Mainland in the 1950s, Hong Kong urbanites in the latter decades of the twentieth century to the transnational capitalist class entering the twenty-first century. These dialogues involve sets of social relations, thus implicating the question of power. Instead of all about an idealistic way of life, confrontations do exist in the village, and they can be no less intense than disputes that happen elsewhere. Perhaps the major difference is that disputes in the village are more visible, and in many cases parties involved tend to resolve them directly without the intervention of any intermediary from the outside or government agents. As we shall see in this thesis, even with the intervention of government agents, residents can negotiate the intervention process on the ground. Whereas in the metropolis, the anonymity of social relations and management of everyday life in the hands of such

third parties as bureaucrats and professionals mean that sometimes we do not even know with whom exactly we are engaged in dialogues and disputes.

Finally, I would like to reiterate one point about my study: I am not arguing for the preservation of Mui Wo as a protected zone whatsoever. Due to the increasing environmental awareness in the face of a deteriorating urban environment, some urbanites have become vocal opponents to the development of the countryside; however, this is problematic if they do not question their own position in the larger issue of development. Many of them are interested in preserving the rural as a 'backyard' to the metropolis. In my view, if the rural is only a hinterland to city dwellers, if we oppose to the 'development' of the rural so as to preserve it for the enjoyment of the urban dwellers without questioning 'development' *per se*, including its logic behind, there will be a moral issue in such opposition. A question often asked by the indigenous resident but rebuked by the environmentalist is: why is the former not entitled to development (and all the benefits behind it including financial ones) while others are making a fortune out of it? While I do not agree with the logic of such thinking, I must say there is certain legitimacy behind this question.

This question is all the more legitimate when posed to the transnational capitalist class (TCC) and the local middle class, who make up some of the most vocal groups opposing development in the countryside. Globalisation brings the TCC to live in various major cities across the world, including Hong Kong. Thanks to the globalised leisure and tourism industry, the local middle class is also able to travel to different countries, though not necessarily to live in those countries on a longer-term basis. The immense development pressure exerted on the countryside that we are witnessing today

is, in one way or another, related to this global mobility of the TCC and the middle class. In other words, development does not come from the nation or government alone. In being critical of the development of the countryside, the TCC and middle class may also want to reflect on how their own ways of life add up to the development pressure. Capitalistic development is the appropriation of space, urban and rural alike, into the mode of modern capitalist production in order to generate surplus value out of it. The TCC and local middle class accumulate their capital thanks to globalisation and market liberalisation, which constitute the driving force behind the dramatic changes in our urban landscape, notably the waterfront in Central and West Kowloon as we have seen earlier in this chapter. But then they go into a rural village and demand it to be 'preserved', such that they can have a 'getaway' place during their weekends and holidays. In this sense, by calling upon the 'preservation' of the countryside, the urbanites are in effect colonising it. By seeing the rural as 'backyard', history and people living in rural places are made subordinate to the urban core. Under this view, the only function of rural areas with 'natural' traits is to serve the urban, to serve the function of leisure for urbanites. In this way, nature becomes subordinated to leisure pursuits and then is destroyed by such pursuits.

In addition, in going to the countryside to 'protect' and 'save' it on behalf of the villagers, there is an implication that the urbanites know better than the rural residents, who are thought to be incapable of defending themselves or their own land. This is why the urbanites have to intervene and act on behalf of the villagers, who simply cannot speak.

Without addressing the issue of alienation, boredom and monotony in the everyday in modern urban life, and without a true respect for the countryside including for those whose livelihood lies in there, the environmentalist agenda to ‘preserve’ the rural, which is based on the values and interests of the urbanite, cannot shunt off a certain sense of hypocrisy. Worse still, it is in effect colonising the countryside. Under such circumstances, to borrow Lefebvre’s concept, the right to the city has been displaced by the ‘right to nature’, a pseudo-right.³⁷ Even if nature is ‘conserved’ successfully, it is neither a victory for the rural nor for the urban.

Instead of advocating for the preservation of the countryside or its ‘salvation’ by metropolitan elites, I argue in this thesis that Mui Wo, with its rural traditions and an interesting episode of development of over a decade that was spared by the exigencies of capital, has, on the contrary, a lot to inform the metropolis, in the sense that there are indeed alternatives ‘out there’. I also see changes as necessary and healthy for any community, and that the encounter of people from different backgrounds can bring novel experiences to the individuals involved and the community at large. The problematic lies in *how* these changes are being brought about, and whether or not different people in the community can stand on an equal footing in the changing process.

vi. Mui Wo in the metropolis

Over the past few decades, Mui Wo has been subject to various transformations, including changes in its demographic profile. There are of course ‘indigenous residents’, which refer to the patrilineal descendants of people who were residing in the New Territories villages on 1 July 1898. Often, discussions about the New Territories tend to revolve around the indigenous resident and such institutional arrangements as Heung

³⁷ Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 158.

Yee Kuk (HYK), the organisation representing the interests of indigenous residents, and discussions surrounding Mui Wo are no exception. However, the indigenous resident forms only part of the picture. We have discussed earlier the encounter between formerly urban-based artists and local kids. In Chapter 2, I am going to show further that the New Territories has always been a heterogeneous community. Immigrant, tenant farmers have made significant contributions to the development of the New Territories including Mui Wo, but they are neglected in the dominant discourses about the place. Like many parts of the New Territories, Mui Wo is composed of a diverse group of residents, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, whose encounters – and sometimes confrontations – with each other have brought about dynamic changes to the community and created a general impact on how the place was developed.

Mui Wo has never been closed onto itself. It has known a wave of immigrants from the mainland of China in the 1950s, including Dongguan of Guangdong Province. Some of them are former Kuomintang fighters who came to settle in Mui Wo after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Today, it is one of the few remaining places in Hong Kong where 'Double Ten', the anniversary of the founding of the Republic of China (ROC), is still openly celebrated.

As discussed in the previous section, the community is also an adopted home of local urbanites who would like to lead a greener, more tranquil way of life away from urban Hong Kong where they grew up. Among those who moved to Mui Wo in the 1990s were young artists, musicians and craftsmen, and they gradually gave a reputation to Mui Wo for being home to a group of 'alternative people'. But this is not possible without the somewhat 'alternative' character of the indigenous residents either.

According to Yen, a local Chinese resident who had lived in a number of rural villages across the territory before settling in Mui Wo, the place is the most open rural community in Hong Kong he has encountered. 'In those walled villages in Yuen Long, you may have to pay for the way of access simply for moving some furniture.' In contrast, he finds local residents in Mui Wo very kind. 'They would leave you alone as long as you don't cause them trouble.' This openness of Mui Wo residents is one crucial factor why the community is a welcoming home to such a variety of people.

In recent years, Mui Wo witnessed the moving in of more urban dwellers in search of a greener life. In contrast to the above mentioned group of local urbanites who tend to be of the lower middle class, many of these relatively new arrivals are middle-class professionals, using Mui Wo as their residential base and going to work in urban Hong Kong. This trend of ruralisation, which refers to the phenomenon of people moving away from the city to the countryside and embracing the nature, is related to an increasingly polluting environment in urban Hong Kong. At any given point of time in history, the two forces of urbanisation and ruralisation are engaged in a dialectical process, with their contradictory effects acting and re-acting against each other – when excesses of urbanisation become unbearable, the tendency of ruralisation surfaces. However, one has to be careful in considering what lies behind the terms 'rural' and 'urban'. As society becomes 'modernised', the features of modern life penetrate the rural as well as the urban. Just as urbanisation following the logic of capital is destroying the city, resulting in the 'everyday' being marked by boredom and monotony, 'ruralisation' following the same logic of capital is likewise going to destroy the countryside. The urbanite moving to the countryside as a reaction to urbanisation is anti-cité, anti-tree

cutting. To Lefebvre, this is no longer nature; instead, under such circumstances, the notion of nature becomes an ideology, a symbolism.³⁸ The countryside is at risk of disappearance if the urbanite is not aware of the damage that his/her mere presence would cause. The urbanite who has a country house transports with him the city and destroys the countryside in going to his country house. As the object disappears with the activity that occupies it, the countryside disappears with the urbanite, being transformed into the picturesque.³⁹

City dwellers do not become a villager simply by living in a village. They carry the urban with them, even if they do not bring along any new planning.⁴⁰ When they move to the village with their set of urban, modern practices and values, indirectly they participate in the destruction of the rural. The 'right to nature' is actually colonising and even killing nature and the countryside. One example is modern hygienic standards. The soil must be nourished with micro-organisms so as to be fertile. In the language of the French farmer, 'clean' (*propre*) also means 'dead' (*mort*). However, the modern urbanite wants cleanliness. In Mui Wo, some newly arrived residents complain of 'foul smell' coming from the vegetable fields when farmers use fertilisers derived from manure, but these complaining residents overlook the fact that this 'foul' smell forms an integral part of what makes the place 'rural' and attractive to them in the first place. To drive away this smell is also destroying the rural, encouraging the use of chemical fertilisers, among others. The rural is no longer organic but is reduced to the picturesque.

Moreover, the two processes of urbanisation and ruralisation are both subject to the hegemony of the commodity world, with the preoccupation of exchangeability

³⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *Du Rural à l'Urbain* (Paris : Anthropos, 2001), 205.

³⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *Du Rural à l'Urbain*, 205.

⁴⁰ Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 158-159.

taking over use value. Capitalism, always in search of newer forms of profit, has managed to take advantage of the changing trends in lifestyle. For instance, in recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of the so-called LOHAS, the acronym for 'Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability'. Like the label 'organic', LOHAS has become another sign *chic* among the middle classes, appropriated by the capitalist to seek profits. So much so a middle-class housing compound in Tseung Kwan O is named 'Lohas Park'!

Among the urban dwellers coming to reside in Mui Wo in recent years, a dominant class of both Chinese and non-Chinese origins stand out in terms of their number and in the aesthetic and economic impacts on local space that they have engendered. The most obvious changes have been the emergence of a number of luxurious, gated, Western-style villas, and a remarkable rise in the overall housing prices and rents in Mui Wo and South Lantau at large; but there are other changes in cultural aspects. These are issues that I am going to discuss in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5. Many of these residents are English-speaking, and go to work in the Central Business District of Hong Kong Island. Based on the global class theories by Leslie Sklair⁴¹ and by William Robinson,⁴² I opt to use the term transnational capitalist class (TCC) in this study to refer to this group of residents, since it encapsulates their characteristics as a social grouping based on their class position, whose values and interests transcend national and racial differences.

Concretely, by the term TCC I am referring to a group of high-salaried professionals in Mui Wo including practitioners in the financial sector, lawyers, pilots,

⁴¹ Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001).

⁴² William Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class, and State in a Transnational World* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

senior executives and educators working either at international schools or local schools in the capacity of Native English Teachers (NET). The majority of them are white of European origins including British, German and French. Some of them are ethnic Chinese but have spent many years studying and living abroad. Some are mixed couple families whereby a typical case is an Asian woman (including local Hong Kong Chinese, Filipino and Indonesian) married to a white male. In the age of globalisation, driving the movement of people is above all the movement of capital across borders. As their professions reflect, the presence of TCC in Mui Wo is inextricably linked to the globalisation of capitalism.

However, it has to be mentioned that not all whites living in Mui Wo are upper middle class professionals, especially among the earlier arrivals. Some of them give language classes for a living, while some others work at restaurants or perform decoration work for houses. They have lived in Mui Wo or Hong Kong for as long as over twenty years. Of course, this is part of the colonial legacy, with British and other European nationals arriving in Hong Kong in the pre-1997 period to find opportunities in the colony.

A major feature that distinguishes foreign nationals who moved in recently from those long-time residents is their economic power. The most recent phenomenon of TCC moving to Mui Wo is related to gentrification, generally referring to the transformation of former derelict housing quarters into middle-class neighbourhoods. But more significantly, it is the restructuring of urban space as a result of the economic and social restructuring of advanced capitalist economies.⁴³ Today, gentrification has to be

⁴³ Neil Smith, 'Gentrification, the Frontier, and the Restructuring of Urban Space', in *Gentrification of the City*, ed. Neil Smith and Peter Williams (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986), 20-21.

understood in the context of globalisation: not only are gentrifiers predominantly white, but the gentrification process generates a ‘white Anglo appropriation of urban space and urban history’. Some gentrification is also no longer confined to cities; there are examples of growing rural gentrification.⁴⁴ Furthermore, instead of merely residential rehabilitation, gentrification is above all a visible spatial component of the profound transformation in finance capitalism, as reflected in the redevelopment of waterfronts, the rise of hotel and convention complexes in central cities, large-scale luxury office and residential developments, and fashionable, high-priced shopping districts.⁴⁵ Hong Kong, as a ‘global city’, occupies a central position in the global circulation network of capital and personnel. While we are seeing the redevelopment of the Central waterfront or West Kowloon into high-class office, retail and hotel complexes, the same visible spatial transformation is extended into Mui Wo as a residential site for the TCC.



⁴⁴ Rowland Atkinson and Gary Bridge, introduction to *Gentrification in a global context: the new urban colonialism*, edited by Rowland Atkinson and Gary Bridge (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-3.

⁴⁵ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 261.

While the TCC find themselves in Hong Kong following the flows of capital in the first place, good quality of life is perhaps as important as good money to them. What distinguishes the TCC from the lower classes is not only their higher level of income, but also the freedom to move around cities and to pursue a lifestyle of their choice, and the knowledge of how to lead a good life. With the increasing environmental awareness, for many TCC, good life is not only associated with material consumption, but also with the ability to enjoy good air, a green environment, etc. As a result, there has emerged a call for the 'return to nature'; this is one of the backgrounds of the phenomenon of rural gentrification as noted above. Also, since urbanisation is held responsible for such environmental degradation as overcrowding and pollution, then the reverse process of 'ruralisation' seems to be a logical remedy to the problems that we are facing in the city. It is thus not without surprise that ruralisation first appeared in western countries where urbanisation-industrialisation is also strongest. This call for the return to nature is popular among the TCC (and the local middle class as well), many of whom have moved out of the city and turned to a more 'rustic' lifestyle, while retaining their high-paying job in the city.

The gentrified neighbourhood in the global context is a site of the reproduction of a wider set of power relations and contacts which operate at local, urban, regional and international levels.⁴⁶ In many ways, there are signs that Mui Wo has been turned into a site that reproduces such power relations. The TCC is characterised by their use of English, the most notable global language, in everyday life, including in their interactions with local people who do not speak the language. A group of TCC residents would feel the ease to converse loudly or even shout in a local village in Mui Wo using

⁴⁶ Atkinson and Bridge, introduction to *Gentrification in a global context: the new urban colonialism*, 7.

English or French. This phenomenon alone represents unequal social relations: I cannot imagine a group of Hong Kong Chinese conversing loudly in Cantonese in a quiet, rural French village without inviting hostility from local residents. As we shall see in Chapter 3, the use of the ‘global language’ among this group of residents has an impact on how daily matters and conflicts are handled. The issue of language is not limited to the use of English, but also includes the use of a technical, legal language.

vii. Alive or dead? When capital penetrates the land

As discussed earlier in this chapter, ‘death’ of Mui Wo, as proclaimed by its district councillor and the TVB documentary *Dead City of Mui Wo*, is defined by the capitalist logic, according to which the place is lifeless if it fails to generate surplus value out of its space. Also, according to the claim, Mui Wo is dead if measured by urban, capitalistic standards. To ‘resurrect’ the place is also the attempt to incorporate Mui Wo into the urban fabric and the capitalistic mode of production.

Indeed, five years after Mui Wo was pronounced ‘dead’ in the TVB news programme, various media reports noted that Mui Wo has become the latest hotspot for real estate speculators, with property prices recording increases of up to 30-40% in the first half of 2011.⁴⁷ Some attribute this to the government’s plan to ‘renovate’ Mui Wo⁴⁸, a plan that will be discussed in Chapter 2, which in effect is to produce the space of Mui Wo so as to endow it with exchangeability according to capital’s demands. Viewed from this perspective, all the talk about ‘death’ is the initiative to include Mui Wo in the development discourse, following which something needs to be done (‘resurrection’ and

⁴⁷ Guo-yan Ye, ‘Property in Outlying Islands Crazy Too: Lamma Price over 97 Levels as 5,000 psf’ (離島樓也瘋狂 南丫島呎價 5000 超 97), *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 23 May 2011.

⁴⁸ Jia-min He, Government to Launch Billion Worth Works: Mui Wo Property Market on the Rise’ (政府億萬優化工程 梅窩樓市起動), *iMoney*, 5 May 2011.

hence ‘development’). Power, in the Foucauldian sense, is thus introduced in the form of expert knowledge and bureaucratic intervention once the discourse is set up. This is why a place can have a chance to be spared from the advent of mainstream development when it is left alone. Once some ‘problems’ are identified (‘death’ of Mui Wo), entering the discourse of development (something needs to be done to ‘resurrect’ the place), the whole logic and process of production of space will be triggered off.

Moreover, if the ‘death’ of Mui Wo is due to the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge in 1997 which ended the status of Mui Wo as the only gateway to Lantau Island, its ‘resurrection’ is due to the opening of another road: the new Tung Chung Road in 2009. It is a modern, elevated highway that connects the new town of Tung Chung in northern Lantau, where the airport is located, and South Lantau, replacing the winding and narrow old Tung Chung Road. As a result, Mui Wo and other communities in South Lantau, like Cheung Sha, Tong Fuk and Pui O, become more accessible to motor vehicles and hence more convenient. The capacity of the new highway has greatly increased, meaning more people can come to South Lantau from the city by road. Moreover, the new Tung Chung Road, with its wide, two-lane access, allows vehicles to proceed at a much higher speed, enhancing the circulation of goods and people. These changes have attracted the TCC to move to South Lantau en masse, and thus driving the leap in house prices as mentioned above. As a result, South Lantau has become a goldmine for real estate developers. On 5 July 2013, the government announced that it has received 27 bidding proposals for a single residential lot in Cheung Sha that it put up for tender.

On the other hand, some people are driven off their homes because they can no longer afford the rents, which keep increasing at a rapid pace. A new road that has revived the property market by bringing in the transnational capitalist class is displacing the lower classes at the same time. Unfortunately, they are not alone.

In the early morning of 5 June 2013, eight cattle were killed by one or more vehicles which ran over them on South Lantau Road. To date, no culprit has been found.⁴⁹ This incident again raised the debate on the presence of the hundreds of cattle and buffaloes in Mui Wo and other parts of Lantau. There are voices, as always, that the animals should be removed as they cannot fit in the development of Mui Wo and Lantau Island at large anymore. According to this view, as there are more and wider roads, and more motor vehicles speeding on these roads, the slow moving cattle are ‘obstructing’ traffic circulation and hence, development. However, the tragic, indignant death of the eight cattle prompts us to re-think: when capital penetrates the land through the modern road, there is life and death; but life for whom, and death for whom?

There are many species that are being excluded by capitalistic development and its speed, but many of them have simply gone unnoticed. Many people are also excluded without any noise. In a conversation with the author, Yun, the independent artist who first moved to Mui Wo in 2000, noted that the cattle and buffaloes are highly visible because of their size; their death and disappearance are also most visible and a telling sign: when Mui Wo is a welcoming home to these big animals, it is also a heterogeneous community composing the slow, the poor, the handicapped, the independent artist, the

⁴⁹ The police arrested an English engineer living in the village of Tong Fuk the following day, on the grounds that her private vehicle suffered some damages and was tainted with animal blood and hair. However, judging from the size and relative minor damages of her car, it looked unlikely that it had crashed into as many as eight cattle.

weird, the romantic, the idealist... On the contrary, a kind of development and speed that will not accommodate the cattle is also one which will not accommodate these people and all others who are not considered 'fit' and 'successful' in the System. Yun, as well as Video Power, the video-arts group, moved out of Mui Wo altogether in early 2013 due to, among others, escalating rents in the place.

viii. About the project

From the research proposal that I first conceived to the dissertation in its present form, the project has grown by a substantial extent. New, insightful data from the 'field' kept emerging during the course, and I have adopted a largely flexible approach throughout such that these data can be taken into account to the furthest extent.

The project started out as a relatively simple concern: the government was going to launch a HK\$300 million project to revamp Mui Wo (Chapter 2), and in many ways I found that this top-down approach would have a negative impact on the everyday life of the residents, for instance cycling that many of them practice on a daily basis. More fundamentally, this is going to be a tourism-oriented project which will compromise the needs of residents and eventually the unique characteristics of the place of Mui Wo. What I had in mind was to critique the government plan and government-sponsored development at large. I would interview residents about their daily life to demonstrate the uniqueness of life in Mui Wo and to investigate how it would be affected by a top-down government development plan. However, very quickly I found that things are much more complicated than that. For instance, during my interviews many residents would be rather critical of the government and would say that they oppose to a development plan imposed from the above, and that they like Mui Wo for how it is and

for its natural environment, etc. But as a resident living in the community, I also had this convenience of talking and listening to people in daily situations – when I took the ferry, went shopping or sipping a cup of tea at a local café. I was also able to observe closely what was happening on the ground on a day-to-day basis over a period of around seven years. Gradually, I realised that despite all the good will, the *practice* of some of the residents who are critical of the government's plan might actually have contributed to the need for development, and in such cases, the government cannot be said to be the sole agent behind these 'top-down' development moves. In some cases, government actions were shaped by residents.

In numerous instances I found spontaneous conversations and participant observations more telling than interviews with pre-set questions. Interviews are very helpful when I would like people to sit back and reflect on the meaning that they derive from things that they do every day, like cycling (Chapter 4), but in cases where I would like to know what people would act and react in a given situation, participant observation is most useful. At the same time, I tried my best not to compromise the interests of anyone by keeping anonymity or using pseudonyms whenever appropriate.

The literature review was carried out throughout my data collection process to help me explain the emerging results. As I went through the literature, I was able to situate the government's role in development and urbanisation in the historical context, more precisely in post-war Hong Kong. At any point in time, government actions are also shaped by forces relating to capitalistic development. As such, my original plan of critiquing the government plan dissolved into the background and gave rise to the larger

critique of capitalistic development and globalisation, within which the Hong Kong government is one of the actors acting in response to the exigencies of development.

It is thus far from a ‘government vs residents’ picture that I had presumed at the outset. With the globalisation picture in the background, the dynamics and complexity ‘on the ground’ also constitute a story that is far from a dichotomous conception; the ‘people’ is not a homogeneous whole, but is composed of people from different classes and with various social and cultural identities.

People whom I can identify in Mui Wo can be roughly categorised into the following: first, ‘indigenous inhabitants’ whose legal status as the descendants of residents who were living in the New Territories before 1898 is sealed in the Basic Law, the mini-constitution of Hong Kong. This means each male descendant of theirs is entitled to the so-called ‘Small House’ land. A second group are descendants of residents who settled in Mui Wo after 1898; they have lived in the place for as long as the descendants of the ‘indigenous residents’, but unlike the latter, they and their male descendants are not entitled to a ‘Small House’. A third group are people originally from the Mainland who came to settle in Mui Wo just before and after 1949, the year when the Chinese Communist Party took over the reign of the country. Some of them are followers of the legendary warlord Yuen Hai Kao (alias Yuen Wah Chiu) from Zengcheng in Guangdong Province who later fought alongside the Kuomintang against the Communists. As early as 1920s, Yuen moved some of his family members to Mui Wo. He built the Yuen’s Mansion, now classified as a Grade II historic building. In the 1940s, Yuen moved his whole family, including wives, sons and 80 followers to Mui

Wo to settle there permanently. He passed away in 1971 at the age of 83.⁵⁰ Today his descendants and some of his followers are still living in Mui Wo, and will celebrate the ‘Double Ten’ Anniversary at the restaurant owned by the Yuens in October every year. Fourth are a wave of younger urbanites who started to move to Mui Wo from around the 1990s, whom I have mentioned earlier in this chapter; many of them are artists including painters, musicians and craftsmen. Other local urbanites who moved to Mui Wo from the 2000s can be said to ‘flee’ the problems of urban life like noise, air pollution and the general boredom of urbanity. They find refuge in the more natural environment of Mui Wo; some commute to urban Hong Kong for work, while others become engaged in gardening and organic farming, for personal interest or income-generating. Finally, some Mainland Chinese would be in the community for short-term or longer-term stays, either legally or illegally. They are engaged by local employers to perform menial work. With the revival of local agriculture in recent years, a few are employed by local farmers to give a helping hand in their fields.

As for non ethnic-Chinese groups, they comprise whites and non-whites. I have described the white population earlier in the chapter. Among non-whites are a number of Thai and Vietnamese women married to local Chinese men. They are well integrated into the local community – apart from the fact that many of them have a Chinese-looking face, they have also learnt to speak Cantonese in an almost impeccable way.

Like many other places in Hong Kong, Mui Wo is home to a number of foreign domestic helpers of Filipino, Indonesian, Nepali or Sri Lankan origins. But some of these people are in other professions, from dishwashers and waitresses in restaurants,

⁵⁰ Yin Shan Lo and Anthony McHugh, *Driving Lantau: Whisper of an Island* (Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2011), 67-69.

office workers to school teachers. In particular, there is a strong Filipino community. The basketball games that the community organise regularly at the local sports ground can easily gather a few dozen compatriot players and spectators.

The above list is of course not exclusive but covers the main groups that I am able to identify in Mui Wo. As can be imagined, for a 5,000-strong community with such a mix of cultures and ethnicities, there are a lot of intriguing interactions among them. In many ways, this multiethnic and multicultural dynamics is also a reflection of such dynamics in the wider, global context. Power relations exist among these groups as much as they do between the government and the 'people'. Government agents are not stone-faced bureaucrats either, but would demonstrate their flexibility depending on the concrete situation. As I carried on with the study, another focus began to take shape, i.e. to understand the dynamics of power relations in everyday occasions.

A major question emerged as I tried to pen down my findings: how was I going to demonstrate this complexity on the ground and make sense out of it? I think one way is to recount the stories as a novelist would do. This is why readers would find that I sometimes go into detailed descriptions of a micro-situation – how people act and react when a septic tank overflows (Chapter 3), what residents think about the progress in their bicycling techniques (Chapter 4), or how a water dripping air-conditioner leads to government intervention in village affairs (Chapter 5). Sometimes I quote what people say in length. I believe there is significance in not only *what* is said, but also *how* and under *what circumstances* things are said, since all of these form an integral part of the story. How conversations are conducted in a particular context and the language used would also shed light on the relations between the interlocutors. In this regard, I concur

with Ann Gray when she writes that the ‘element of surprise’ is central to research and intellectual work in general. Listening to people and respecting their accounts are not only important from the ethical viewpoint, but would also enlighten the researcher with data and perspectives that she had not previously thought of. It is also necessary to attend to sensuous human experience. All these ‘put real flesh on the bones of methodological questions’.⁵¹ While I agree interpretation and synthesis of data is important from the part of the researcher, I think it is worthwhile to keep the writing open towards people’s accounts both in their contents and in their *form*. Sometimes it would destabilise and disrupt my own narrative, but the benefit of this juxtaposition of other people’s accounts and my own writing is to weave some kind of dialogue between them. Since theory is based on my data, and since I view writing as part of the research process itself, this dialogue has been very helpful for me to generate the theory out of this research. The dialogue also includes that with other texts including theoretical writings, documentaries, novels and blogs.

It is through this interweaving of various texts that I gradually discovered the significance and meaning of the road, which is the main theme of Chapter 5. But the road and its related concepts of time, space, connections and flows also form a thread connecting the different parts of the study. The road connects otherwise isolated points into a circuit. The logic of capitalism is about the general speeding-up of life and social processes within this circuit; the preoccupation with efficiency and rationality leads to homogenisation of space with the intervention of the government (Chapter 2 and 3). It also wants larger, straighter and wider roads (Chapter 5). Under these preoccupations,

⁵¹ Ann Gray, *Research Practice for Cultural Studies: Ethnographic Methods and Lived Cultures* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003), 5-6.

roads are only passages where hardly any human interactions happen since maximum speed and minimum obstacles are sought after.

At the same time, human society also benefits from the road connection such that individuals or communities will not be left in isolation, and all cannot be explained or governed by the logic of capital. Above all, roads and paths, which connect individuals with other individuals and with society at large, harbour traces of the development of society and also individual memories. There, time and space are no longer abstract as it would be the case under the capitalistic logic. Nor is efficiency the only concern. Human interactions take place and stories unfold. For instance, we enter into dialogue and eventually take possession of unwanted materials found on the sidewalk or being dragged along the small path by a neighbour (Chapter 3). Coupled with the embodied practice of cycling, the road is where we fulfil our sense of achievement and progress (Chapter 4). Through the incident of protest against the redevelopment of a village small path, life and happenings over the years are conjured up in a documentary (Chapter 5).

The ‘road’ also takes up a metaphorical sense in this research. Rather than offering a critique of capitalistic development only, the central question goes further to delineate an alternative path of development exemplified by Mui Wo. The spirit of a place can be found in the most mundane aspects of life, and that of Mui Wo I found in its waste treatment methods (Chapter 3), everyday transport (Chapter 4), and life and activity on those small paths (Chapter 5). These features represent an alternative way of life that is not governed by the logic of capital – and this happens in the age of global capitalism which seems to be so all-encompassing.

I was lucky enough to know a small circle of friends in Mui Wo who would provide me with a lot of critical feedback during the course of my research. Such valuable criticisms obliged me to constantly reflect on its value to the community itself, all the while I was carrying out this research in a university setting. Despite all the doubts, I somehow know from the beginning that being in the academia would allow me to give something back to the place, perhaps better than my being in any other capacity. At the interview to gain admission to the PhD programme in Cultural Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in early 2008, I was asked by one professor (in an extremely warm and friendly way) whether or not I was prepared to read a lot of theory. Apparently, she saw that I had no previous background in Cultural Studies and had the majority of my working experience gained in a non-academic setting. But indeed, a lot of theory was precisely what I needed. I needed the theoretical tools, together with the resources and training support from the university to help me answer all those questions that I had in mind. This dissertation, written in English and in its current form, may not be accessible to the wider audience of Mui Wo; but it was the resources from the doctoral research – both intellectual and financial – that permitted me to stay on a virtually full-time basis in Mui Wo over the past few years and distilled my research results into not only my dissertation but also into a number of blog writings that would reach a wider audience. These blogs cover not only issues in Mui Wo but also other social issues for which my thinking is formed and informed by my intellectual growth; they also include more emotional and personal writings. Moreover, the time I spent in Mui Wo allowed me to build up more lasting relations with residents and I have tried to lend support to whomever, whenever I can, as a kind of giveback to the community.

ix. Conclusion

To summarise, my project here is to critique capitalistic development in the age of global capitalism which, with the agent of the transnational capitalist class and the intervention of government, is leading to the homogenisation of space such that capital can extract its maximum surplus value possible out of space. By discussing the specificity and heterogeneity of the development of Mui Wo, as a rural town lying on the fringe of the metropolis of Hong Kong, I argue that it provides a unique case of how alternative development is possible, showing that there is not a single royal path to development. The marginality and rural traditions of Mui Wo provide resources and inspirations for us to interrogate the assumptions behind capitalistic development, and to see that there are indeed alternatives ‘out there’ if we can go beyond the capitalistic logic.

If roads are the beginning of all development, Mui Wo had been spared from the frenzy of capitalistic development by the opening of Tsing Ma Bridge in the late 1990s which ended its status of the ‘gateway’ to Lantau Island. For more than a decade, a less busy Mui Wo provided an alternative road to urbanites of the lower classes to experience a way of living that is different from the metropolis. Some independent artists took this opportunity to develop a unique philosophy of arts and living out of the resources and inspirations provided by Mui Wo, including its rural culture, and the people, animals, vegetation, farmlands and nature there. The marginality of these artists, together with the marginality of Mui Wo and its slow, cycling culture and waste treatment methods, is like a critical reflection on the metropolitan core, informing us all is not right in the wider society and the dominant culture. More importantly, through my discussions of this concrete case of Mui Wo, I seek to argue that an alternative path of

development, though small, winding and difficult, is not merely a romantic dream, but can actually be reality.

Chapter 2 Government-led development and homogenisation of space

In late 2004, the Government proposed a *Concept Plan for Lantau* to provide an overall planning framework for the future development of Lantau Island. According to the plan, Mui Wo is to be given a ‘facelift’ and developed into a rural, touristic township for holidaymakers. The initiative marks a conscious and deliberate effort on the part of the government to include Mui Wo in a coordinated, large-scale development plan. I also see this as a move to homogenise hitherto heterogeneous space – Mui Wo and Lantau Island as a whole are part of the ‘New Territories’, which were taken over by the British under conditions different from Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula in the late nineteenth century. This led to the adoption of a different general and land administrative approach towards the New Territories, and thus formed a heterogeneous place within the territory of Hong Kong. However, the Hong Kong government has never hesitated to include space of the New Territories into the modern mode of production when need arises. Such intervention in space is reinforced by the fact that land has been a main source of revenue for the government since the colonial days.

The purpose of this chapter is to map the government’s plan to give a ‘facelift’ to Mui Wo in the historical context of state-led development in the New Territories during the post-war years. I try to show that not only has the government been always intervening in space, but that its development strategy also changes in response to changing capitalistic exigencies. I will argue that this government initiative to develop Mui Wo is part of its wider and long held strategy towards the New Territories. By tracing the development of the New Territories in the post-war years, I try to show how the Hong Kong government has been intervening in its development over the past few

decades, including the manipulation of relations between groups representing different interests, such that the New Territories can support the government's overall development strategy.

With changing times, the development strategy of the government has also been changing. In the post-war years, the need to industrialise led to the urbanisation of the New Territories and the development of new towns in formerly rural areas. In the case of Lantau Island, Shek Pik Reservoir was built in the 1950s to provide water to the increasing population in urban areas, and Chek Lap Kok Airport and the new town of Tung Chung were developed in the 1990s. With Hong Kong entering the 'post-industrial' and global capitalism era, the development strategy of space shifted to reflect these changes in the macroeconomic environment. In the case of Mui Wo, with its green and natural environment, it provides the private residential space for the transnational capitalist class, something we have already discussed in Chapter 1. These natural traits also prompt the government to baptise it as a 'rural, touristic township' so as to endow the place with the necessary signs and symbols and to include it in the circuit of (touristic) consumption, as Hong Kong is continually being integrated in the development of the Pearl River Delta with the construction of such infrastructures as the Hong Kong – Zhuhai – Macao Bridge and Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link.

i. State-led development

In Chapter 1, I have discussed the global phenomenon of gentrification, which refers to the restructuring of urban space as a result of the economic and social

restructuring of advanced capitalist economies.¹ Neil Smith saw a dramatic change in the role of the state in the process of gentrification across western countries from the 1990s. In contrast to the withdrawal of the national state in the earlier phases of gentrification, he noted a reversal of trend in which there was an intensification of partnerships between private capital and the local state.²

In Hong Kong, Iam-chong Ip notes that the setting up of the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) to replace the Land Development Corporation in 2001 epitomises this intensification of private-public partnership in gentrification. To Ip, URA is a typical and even ‘extreme example’ of government intervention. The level of intervention in Hong Kong is much stronger than those western countries surveyed by Smith.³ Indeed, contrary to the common belief that Hong Kong is a ‘laissez-faire economy’, since the colonial days the Hong Kong government has been intervening heavily in the development of Hong Kong, including the development of new towns in the New Territories, such that space is produced and organised in such a way as to cope with economic production. As we shall see later in this chapter, with Lantau Island falling into the latest development agenda of the government, intervention is also extended into Mui Wo with the launch of a ‘facelift’ plan to redevelop the core areas of Mui Wo.

State intervention in land development in Hong Kong is reinforced by the fact that the government owns all the land in the territory. Since the colonial days, the Hong Kong government has been relying on land lease sales to generate its revenues, as London made it clear that the colonial administration was expected to pay its own way.

¹ Smith, ‘Gentrification, the Frontier, and the Restructuring of Urban Space’, 20-21.

² Neil Smith, ‘New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy’, *Antipode* 34(3) (2002): 441.

³ Iam-chong Ip, *Nostalgia for the Present: the Before- and After-life of Cultural Conservation* (為當下懷舊：文化保育的前世今生), (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 2010), 80.

Shortly after the ratification of the Treaty of Nanking which proclaimed Hong Kong to be a permanent British territory, London laid down in its instructions to the Hong Kong Governor that land in the territory must be leased and not sold outright, and that the Hong Kong administration was to levy rates on town property for municipal and police purposes.⁴ The government has been deriving around 30% of its revenue from land lease grants and lease rates and this has not taken into account property taxes yet.⁵ As such, the government has substantial interests in the land and property markets.

However, from the first day the British ‘leased’ the New Territories, it formed a space to be distinguished from the urban areas of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Above all, its ‘leasing’ by the signing of the *Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory* in 1898 obliged the colonial administration to adopt a completely different approach to land administration. Apart from the fact that it was not a permanent cession, the main reason was that the earlier cessions in Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula were sparsely populated, with an estimated population of 7,450 in Hong Kong Island including 2,000 boat dwellers. In contrast, the New Territories was home to around 100,000 residents in some 800 villages at the turn of the century. According to Nissim, the government had no intention to displace so many people and it was decided to make arrangements so that residents could prove ownership and be given title to their land.⁶ However, this decision was no doubt also related to political considerations, as British colonisers met armed resistance from the local population when it was prepared to take over the New Territories. As a result, a whole 10 months elapsed before the

⁴ Nissim, *Land Administration and Practice in Hong Kong*, 9-11.

⁵ Jonathan Grant, ‘Cultural Formation in Postwar Hong Kong’, in *Hong Kong Reintegrating with China*, ed. Pui-tak Lee (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), 172.

⁶ Nissim, *Land Administration and Practice in Hong Kong*, 17.

British flag was hoisted in the New Territories on 16 April 1899.⁷ In view of the political resistance to British rule, Henry Arthur Blake, then Governor of Hong Kong, promised in a proclamation dated 7 April 1899 to New Territories villagers that ‘your commercial and landed interests will be safeguarded, and your usages and good customs will not in any way be interfered with’.⁸ With the consent of London, the government installed a separate administrative and legal system in the New Territories. District Officers were charged with general duties and land administration, exercising both police and civil jurisdiction. Villages and sub-districts were left in the charge of their own leaders, under the watchful eyes of the district officers and the police.⁹

This adoption of a general and land administration system different from the urban colony made the New Territories, including Lantau Island, a heterogeneous space within the territory of Hong Kong. However, over the next decades the government has been taking steps, both political and administrative ones, in its attempt to homogenise space in the New Territories to include it in the urban fabric. James Hayes, who served 32 years in the Hong Kong British administration, half of which in the New Territories, conceded that ‘the authorities would not hesitate to take back leased land for development projects whenever the need arose’.¹⁰ As we shall see later in this chapter, government-led development and increasing urbanisation also resulted in an increasingly rational and bureaucratic approach towards the governance of the New Territories.

⁷ James Hayes, *The Great Difference: Hong Kong's New Territories and Its People 1898 -2004* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 24-25; Chi-Man Kwong and Victor Sit, *The History of Heung Yee Kuk, New Territories: from Leased Territory to One Country, Two Systems* (新界鄉議局史——由租借地到一國兩制), (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing and Advanced Institute for Contemporary China Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2011), 39-46.

⁸ James Hayes, ‘The Great Difference, The Great Rift, and The Great Need: The New Territories of Hong Kong and its People, Past and Present’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Administration* 30 no. 2 (2008): 144.

⁹ Hayes, *The Great Difference*, 26.

¹⁰ Hayes, *The Great Difference*, 46.

In the case of Lantau Island, the building of Shek Pik Reservoir in the 1950s to provide water to the increasing population in urban areas, and the construction of Chek Lap Kok Airport and the new town of Tung Chung in the 1990s were prominent examples of government-led development to serve the needs of urbanisation and ultimately economic development. Entering the ‘post-industrial’ era of twenty-first century Hong Kong, the government proposed a *Concept Plan for Lantau* to provide an overall planning framework for the future development of Lantau Island. Under this framework, a so-called ‘facelift’ plan for Mui Wo was devised to develop Mui Wo into a themed touristic township for holidaymakers. We have seen in Chapter 1 that the current era of global capitalism is characterised by the penetration of capital into space; more generally, each mode of production has its own particular space. Economic transformations will engender changes in the organisation of space. Largely untouched by large-scale infrastructure development for nearly a century after the British takeover, Lantau Island saw the building of the Hong Kong International Airport in the late 1990s, and will continue to be a site for significant developments in the years to come. In this chapter, I will discuss the ‘facelift’ plan of Mui Wo, and argue that this is part of a wider attempt to homogenise space in Lantau to include it in the development strategy of Hong Kong as a regional metropolis within the Pearl River Delta in the age of global capitalism. In this process, the Hong Kong government plays a pivotal role, in concordance with discussions at the beginning of this chapter that the level of government intervention has increased in the restructuring of space as a result of profound social and economic transformations of highly developed capitalist societies.

Such intervention has implications to the local, lived space; these will be the subject of my discussions in this chapter.

ii. Industrialisation-urbanisation

‘Better City, Better Life’ – such was the theme of the Shanghai Expo 2010.

Almost half a century ago, Henri Lefebvre realised the irreversibility of urbanisation, and decided to turn from the study of the rural to that of the urban. To him, industrial production, after a certain growth, produces urbanisation. The problematic of industrialisation is displaced and becomes that of urban development. In his view, however, industrialisation–urbanisation is a dual process and cannot be severed or separated. The urban contains the meaning of industrial production.¹¹ According to this understanding, a particular form of the urban represents the demands of industrial production, or more generally economic production of the day.

The development of the suburban town of Mourenx in France was for Lefebvre a revealing case. Mourenx is located in Pyrénées-Atlantiques, southern France, near Navarrenx, the native village of Lefebvre. In the 1950s, a large natural gas reserve was discovered in the area, and the agricultural plain was transformed into an industrial site almost overnight. A new city emerged in a matter of ten months to accommodate the employees of the industrial site of Lacq. According to Laurence Costes, Mourenx provided Lefebvre with a concrete case to tackle the problem of planning from a critical perspective. It was a brutal implantation of an entirely new, large housing estate in what used to be a rural area, so as to serve the needs of a high-growth industry, or the economy in general. The urban landscape becomes trivialised due to standardisation

¹¹ Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 130-131; Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la Ville* (Paris: Economica, Anthropos, 2009), 79.

without aesthetic preoccupation. This ‘urbanism of the masses’ expands and diffuses itself to all levels. Under the hegemony of exchange value, all forms of creativity and spontaneity tend to fade away. The city, which used to be ‘oeuvre’ combining a language, a code and a common social tissue, becomes ‘product’.¹²

As we shall see later in this chapter, the development of new towns in the New Territories of Hong Kong also arose as a result of industrialisation in the post-war years. But my own critique of Lefebvre is that he took an exceedingly linear historical view when he saw that ‘urban revolution’ was a historical shift from an agricultural world to an industrial world, and then to an urban world; or that it captures a shift in the internal territorial form of the city, from the political city through the mercantile, then industrial, city to the ‘critical phase’, the harbinger of a certain globalisation of the urban.¹³ No doubt, he had this linear historical view because as a Marxist thinker, he saw the predominant economic mode of production of a society at a given moment as determinant. In such a case, he overlooked the marginal elements that exist in every society. I do not see culture as a logic exclusively following the dominant mode of production. Even in such a highly developed capitalistic, urban society as Hong Kong, culture typically ‘rural’, though increasingly marginal, can be found amidst the urban fabric. One example is the lack of a clear-cut distinction between public and private spheres in some popular neighbourhoods. In Chun Yeung Street, North Point, for instance, researchers find that while some stores would occupy spaces that are supposedly public, at the same time store owners would open their ‘private’ shop space

¹² Laurence Costes, *Henri Lefebvre – Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Ellipses, 2009), 24 ; 82-83.

¹³ Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 122-123; Neil Smith, foreword to *The Urban Revolution*, by Henri Lefebvre (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), x-xi.

for residents from the neighbourhood for casual chats.¹⁴ Meanwhile, on the fringe of urban Hong Kong, such rural areas as Mui Wo and many parts of the New Territories together with their specificity are also found.

The abandon of rural sociology in favour of urban sociology by Lefebvre was also partly due to his own marginalisation and disappointment within the French Communist Party, of which he was member. He would like to draw the party's attention to the peasant question, demonstrating that capital accumulation cannot be done by taking all the resources away from the peasants. But his interest could not find many interlocutors both within and outside the party.¹⁵ 'For 10 years I have worked on the rural questions, agricultural reforms; at the end of ten years I came to realise that this was exactly useless,' he once said.¹⁶ This is why when he claimed: 'It is the world that is changing', and 'I do not cling to the past',¹⁷ he could not shunt off a certain sense of bitterness and even opportunism, which might have prompted him to declare the passé of the rural too hastily. When he claimed that in the case of Lacq-Mourenx, ' [a]t one moment I see a city establish itself with an extraordinary brutality, the city was decided from high above... it is at that moment that I put myself to study the urban phenomenon. I've got hold of reality, the production of a city...',¹⁸ he also gave the impression that he accepted this reality 'brutally' imposed 'from high above' too easily.

Through discussing local waste treatment practices, cycling, and events and stories surrounding a small village path in Mui Wo throughout the rest of this thesis, I try to show that rural life and the rural as culture are not something of the past, although

¹⁴ Siu, 'Decolourised Community', 361-392.

¹⁵ Rémi Hess, *Henri Lefebvre et l'aventure du siècle* (Paris: A.M. Métalié, 1988).

¹⁶ Costes, *Henri Lefebvre – Le droit à la ville*, 26.

¹⁷ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 161.

¹⁸ Costes, *Henri Lefebvre – Le droit à la ville*, 26.

they may become marginal with the advent of urbanisation. If the urban phenomenon as typified by the transformation of Mourenx from the country to the city is 'reality', it is only part of reality. Moreover, as I shall try to show, rural culture, far from being archaic, can be progressive.

iii. The 'New Territories'

Where the massive 'new town' of Sha Tin sprawls today, there was in the 1960's a green garden landscape, a setting which even allowed for the rustic idyll. Still, the presence of the city was ever felt; in the daytime the cavalcade or motor vehicles on the main road, the jammed trains bringing crowds of commuters, and the initial development works which were in progress, all told their tale of the city world. In the night when the compact darkness was dotted by the lights from paraffin flames and naked electric bulbs, a romantic peace came to the valley. In Keng Hau, Wu An and his old father often spent an hour or so, sitting qui[et]ly outside their cottage watching the glimmering glow of the fireflies and their reflections in the water of the irrigated fields. They sat there silently with inscr[u]table faces like images of the eternal, ever suff[er]ing Chinese country man. When they turned their heads to the north they could contemplate the tropical night in the black starry sky over China. But in the other direction, towards Kowloon, Hong Kong and the China Sea, the steep surrounding mountains stood out in dramatic black profile against a brilliant red sky coloured by the millions and millions of lights flooding from the homes and neonlit streets, the lights of the most densely populated area of the world.¹⁹

¹⁹ Göran Aijmer, *Atomistic Society in Sha Tin: Immigrants in a Hong Kong Valley* (Göteborg, Sweden : Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1986), 286-297.

It has to be noted that the ‘New Territories’ as a geographical concept is a construct due to the British colonial rule.²⁰ The so-called ‘New Territories’ leased to the British in 1898 constituted about two-fifths to three-fifths of Xin’an County under the Qing Dynasty, where the economy was agrarian and highly self-sufficient. Jack M. Potter notes that ‘in fact as well as in theory’, there was a permanent tenancy system in the New Territories in traditional times. Traditionally, the rights to leased land in the New Territories have been divided into two parts: first, the right to farm the land, which was granted in perpetuity to the tenant; and second, the right to collect rent on the land, which was reserved by the landlord. The landlord is called the owner of the bottom soil, or ‘land skeleton’ (地骨), which may be termed the right of receiving rent, while the tenant is said to possess the top soil, or ‘soil skin’ (土皮), or the right of cultivation. As long as the tenant paid his rent, he had a perpetual right to farm the land. This right did not cease with the death of the tenant farmer, and was inherited by his sons. It was also possible for the tenant farmer to sublet the right to farm his leased land to another farmer. The landlord could not arbitrarily recall land from their tenant, unless the landlord himself or a member of the kin group which owned the land wished to farm it.²¹ In other words, under this dual system, user rights had precedence over property rights.

According to Yun-woo Lau, from the day the British took over, there had been overwhelming changes related to land in the New Territories.²² Chiu and Hung argue that despite the coloniser’s guarantee of sympathy with ‘native customs and prejudice’,

²⁰ For instance, Yun-woo Lau notes that before 1898, there was no place by the name of ‘New Territories’ within the territory of China. Yun-woo Lau, *A Concise History of the New Territories* (新界簡史), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1999, 1.

²¹ Jack M. Potter, *Capitalism and the Chinese Peasant: Social and Economic Change in a Hong Kong Village* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 117-9.

²² Lau, *Concise History of the New Territories*, 83 °

the colonial administration in fact brought significant changes to the agrarian communities, laying the foundation for future development in the post-war years.²³ To dismantle the great clans'²⁴ power over the Hakkas, the British replaced the dual landownership mentioned above by a unique ownership system, and granted the ownership to holders of top-soil rights exclusively. As such, a 'land reform' was introduced, depriving the great clans of most of their landholdings rented to the Hakkas. A decentralised system of landownership was thus established. The great clans did try to resist but their efforts were thwarted by military, political and economic repression, most notably through a ban on the possession of arms, which made it impossible for the clans to organise armed resistance again. They could only send humble petitions to the government to express their opinions. They also tried to organise themselves into voluntary associations acceptable to the colonial state. In 1926, leaders from the great clans gathered to form the Heung Yee Kuk (which literally means 'Rural Deliberative Council').²⁵ We will return to a discussion of the Kuk shortly.

Thanks to this land reform, many Hakka villagers were transformed from tenant farmers into owner-cultivators. Before the war, most of the farmland in Hong Kong was used for rice growing. The situation changed dramatically after the Second World War with the colonial administration encouraging vegetable growing through technical, financial and organisational support. With the influx of immigrants from Mainland China, to make a living many of them rented land from poor villagers in Shatin and

²³ Stephen Chiu and Ho-fung Hung, 'State Building and Rural Stability', in *Hong Kong's History: State and Society under Colonial Rule*, ed. Tak-Wing Ngo (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 77.

²⁴ The Tangs, the Haus, the Pangs, the Lius and the Mans are referred to as the 'Five Great Clans'. See Hugh D.R. Baker, 'The Five Great Clans of the New Territories', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 6 (1966): 25.

²⁵ Chiu and Hung, 'State Building and Rural Stability', 78.

Tsuen Wan, who were more than happy to do so, as traditionally vegetable growers had a very low status in relation to rice farmers – and this was why local farmers were reluctant to switch to vegetable farming. By renting out their land, the villagers could have a steady income and engage in other businesses.²⁶ Urban dwellers were also attracted to vegetable farmlands as the income of vegetable farmers was higher than many waged labourers in the city. Even the life of a less successful farmer (in terms of income) had a lot of attraction in that s/he was not working for others and was free to do whatever s/he liked.²⁷

In his field study of Shatin in the 1960s, Aijmer notes that many of the tenant farmers arriving from the Mainland in the 1960s were originally urban workers and some were even petty merchants. He describes the squatters of the Keng Hau neighbourhood as a ‘mixed bag’. Very few people have come directly from rice farming in China to vegetable and flower growing in the New Territories, but most of them had considerable urban experience. In fact, some were true urbanites.²⁸

According to Aijmer, rice cultivation in flooded fields is everywhere endowed with special meaning. All activities related to the cultivation of rice draw meaning from their connection with the agnatic source. The ritualisation of the lineage ideology and the ritualisation of rice cultivation are inseparable in that both are focused on dead forefathers. Giving up rice production would for traditionalist villagers mean a break-up from a social situation dominated by traditional lineage aspirations and goals.²⁹ However,

²⁶ Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’, 90-92.

²⁷ Göran Aijmer, *Economic Man in Sha Tin: Vegetable Gardeners in a Hong Kong Valley* (London and Malmö: Curzon Press, 1980), 61.

²⁸ Göran Aijmer, ‘Migrants into Hong Kong’s New Territories: On the Background of Outsider Vegetable Farmers’, *Ethnos* 38 (1973): 67.

²⁹ Aijmer, *Economic Man in Sha Tin*, 89.

rice cultivation was never very profitable. The growth of urban areas on the Kowloon Peninsula and the arrival of immigrants in the New Territories who, unlike indigenous villagers, were not reluctant to take up vegetable farming, induced the switching to the growing of cash crops – vegetables to be marketed in the new and expanding areas. Indeed, Aijmer sees the replacement of paddy fields with vegetable gardens in the New Territories in the post-war years as a ‘businessman’s enterprise disguised as a rustic farmstead’.³⁰

Mui Wo also saw a mix of residents in the post-war years, when some of the tenant farmers arrived in the place from Dongguan in the 1950s. Some of them were urbanites in their native land. Uncle Yiu, who came to Hong Kong from Dongguan in 1957, was appalled by the ‘backwardness’ of Mui Wo. He said when he first arrived in Mui Wo, he ‘lost his appetite’ as there was ‘not even a single road’ here. To these newly arrived residents, farming, just like any other jobs, was a means to make a living and to support their family. Uncle Yiu, in his early 80s now, had engaged in vegetable cultivation, selling his produce in Western District and Cheung Chau in the early years after he settled in Mui Wo. From 1983, he operated an amusement game centre in Chung Hau Street until his retirement in 2007.

Uncle Cheung came to Hong Kong from Dongguan town in 1951 or 1952, when he was 22 years old and used to grow rice in Mui Wo, but ceased to do so after the construction of Shek Pik Reservoir which diverted water from Mui Wo and a drought in 1957. He switched to vegetable growing but at the same time worked in various petty jobs in Lantau to supplement his income, as income from vegetable growing was not sufficient to support his family. As late as the 1990s, he worked as a sundry worker at

³⁰ Aijmer, *Economic Man in Sha Tin*, 93.

China Light and Power when the airport was being constructed at Chek Lap Kok of Lantau Island.

iv. The Great Transformation

The need to have the New Territories as a buffer of defence between the mainland and the city of Victoria is often quoted as the reason for the lease,³¹ but more recently historians have noted that even before becoming a geographical concept, the ‘New Territories’ was closely linked to land speculation. The British Prime Minister back then, Lord Salisbury refused to take over the New Territories at first, but his position was challenged by his own ministers and other politicians.³² According to Steve Tsang, local British advocates for expansion often cited defensive requirements but they were merely pretexts. A real driving force was the land speculators’ urge to make profits.

The British Minister to China, Sir Claude McDonald, observed in 1898 that ‘[m]any of the colonists have been for years past buying up ground on the Kowloon promontory and adjacent islands as a speculation on the chance of our getting what we are now more or less on the point of getting.’ It was not a coincidence that the most vocal advocates of expansion, Chater and several of the local Navy League’s prominent members, were leading land developers or speculators. They had vested interests in extension.³³

From the moment the British took over the New Territories up till the end of the Second World War, there was no major conflict between the government and villagers over land issues, as there was no major development plans in the New Territories or the

³¹ Kwong and Sit, *History of Heung Yee Kuk*, 32.

³² Kwong and Sit, *History of Heung Yee Kuk*, 33.

³³ Steve Yui-Sang Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 36.

need to take over land in a large scale from villagers there.³⁴ Things changed when the colonial administration launched its plans to develop new towns in the New Territories, with the setting up a Town Planning Board in 1954. Almost two decades of planning, feasibility study, drafting of layouts and pioneering constructions followed.

Development programming received additional momentum in 1972 when the then Governor Sir Murray MacLehose announced a 10-year housing plan to provide sufficient and self-contained flats to 1.8 million people by 1986. According to the plan, most of the new housing was to be provided in the new towns in the New Territories – the complex of Tsuen Wan, Tsing Yi and Kwai Chung, Sha Tin and Tuen Mun.³⁵

According to an account by Kuan and Lau, the New Territories could ‘no longer be kept isolated, they must be regarded as an integral part of Hong Kong, providing the badly needed room for urban and industrial expansion.’³⁶ In addition to providing housing and industrial lands, the New Territories, including Lantau Island, will provide for the recreational needs of urbanites.

... the contribution of the New Territories to the overall welfare of Hong Kong is not to be restricted to residential accommodation and industrial sites. To provide the urban settlers with sports and recreational outlets, remote areas of the New Territories (e.g., Lantau[u] and Saikung)... will blossom with country parks, modern resorts, weekend bungalows, and hotels. In a nutshell, the whole New Territories... have been thrown into the ocean of development.³⁷

³⁴ Lau, *Concise History of the New Territories*, 86.

³⁵ Hansard, Hong Kong Legislative Council, 18 October 1972, <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr72-73/h721018.pdf>, (accessed 21 July 2011).

³⁶ Hsin-chi Kuan and Siu-kai Lau, *Development and the Resuscitation of Rural Leadership in Hong Kong: The Case of Neo-Indirect-Rule* (Hong Kong : The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1979), 13.

³⁷ Kuan and Lau, *Development and the Resuscitation of Rural Leadership in Hong Kong*, 13.

The government, by introducing the landownership reform, successfully diverted the potential conflicts engendered by development in the New Territories and hence the taking over of farmlands to the level of confrontation between individual landlord and tenant. Chiu and Hung note that after a long process of commercialisation in the New Territories, and changes in the landownership system, the landlords, though probably not the tenants, were quite receptive to the idea of land as a commodity. They were quite ready to part with their land and reap the profits. In fact, there were numerous individual attempts to prepare for selling the land to the government, ‘ranging from evicting tenants, replacing permanent with fixed-term tenancy, to leaving land fallow rather than renting it out’.³⁸

To Allen Chun, the ‘exploitative nature of market society’ in Hong Kong created utilitarian rationality as a value of the system and this, together with the widening material gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, helped to destroy the traditional relationship which the indigenous people held toward the land.³⁹ Moreover, colonial land policy and post-war socioeconomic conditions also introduced state intervention to hitherto relatively autonomous village affairs. It formed part of colonial governmentality. From a British legal point of view, the principle of the Lease of the New Territories that guaranteed customary rights to land was merely a concession or exception to the general rule that land was ‘by nature’ property of the government. This was in direct conflict

³⁸ Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’, 93.

³⁹ Allen Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society – The Fictions of Colonial Practice and the Changing Realities of ‘Land’ in the New Territories of Hong Kong* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000), 204-5.

with Chinese imperial law that granted village land its basic autonomy, hence freedom from taxation and other conditions of use.⁴⁰

Instead of a fixed set of rules, custom was always an ongoing negotiation between different interests. However, land issues in the New Territories continue to be framed as ‘legality of inalienable rights to custom’ until the present day. Even as interests, values and intentions transform significantly, policy discourse continues to base itself on the principle of the Lease and defence of indigenous custom (or deference to indigenous rights). To Chun, the institutionalisation of this directive of colonial land policy created in practice ‘an increasingly convoluted set of legal, political and conceptual entanglements’. It not only dualised coloniser and colonised, as well as indigenous and foreign residents, but also divided and pitted indigenous interests against each other according to class relativity in a market situation.⁴¹

v. A more compliant Heung Yee Kuk

Since the establishment of the Heung Yee Kuk, its main function is to handle land and related legal issues due to the lease of the New Territories by the British, actively calling for reforms of the government’s taxation and land policies.⁴² However, before the Second World War, it was not a very powerful organisation and its influence did not extend to the southern part of the New Territories.⁴³ In the 1950s, the government pushed forward its early phase of new town development and met strong resistance from the villagers. Any resumption of land or demolition of buildings would trigger off mobilisations, sometimes not limited to the local level. For instance, when Tai Lam

⁴⁰ Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society*, 136.

⁴¹ Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society*, 307.

⁴² Kwong and Sit, *History of Heung Yee Kuk*, 76; Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’, 79.

⁴³ Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’, 79.

Chung Reservoir was built in the northwestern New Territories, a cluster of villages had to be resettled. The construction of an extensive catchment system also affected the water supply for paddy fields in a large area in the vicinity. Villagers affected refused to be sacrificed under the plan. The construction project was delayed for years, and the Kuk, dominated by the so-called ‘anti-development’ camp at that time, took the side of the villagers against the projects.⁴⁴

As background, in the 1950s the Kuk was broadly divided into two camps.⁴⁵ Apart from the abovementioned ‘anti-development’ camp which was also broadly referred to as the ‘Yuen Long faction’ represented by the Tangs and Pangs, there was the ‘pro-development’ camp, or ‘Tsuen Wan faction’ as led by Ho Chuen-yiu, Chan Yat-san and Cheung Yan-lung. Tsuen Wan, together with Shatin, Tai Po and Tuen Mun had been at the periphery of the rural power structure, but as the expansion of the urban area brought development projects to these relatively accessible areas in the New Territories, leaders of Rural Committees in these areas enjoyed many benefits from these projects because of their cordial relationship with the colonial state. They gradually emerged as a group of wealthy and powerful elite capable of challenging the political leadership of the great clans in the Kuk. In contrast, grassroots villagers and tenants in the rapidly developing areas lost much and gained little. For them, development meant undesirable resettlement and the destruction of their agricultural-based livelihoods.⁴⁶

Kuan and Lau note the caricature of the two camps as follows:

⁴⁴ Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’, 82.

⁴⁵ Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’; Lee Ming Kwan, ‘Heung Yee Kuk’, in *From Village to City – Studies in the Traditional roots of Hong Kong Society*, ed. David Faure, James Hayes and Alan Birch (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 1984), 164-177; Kuan and Lau, *Development and the Resuscitation of Rural Leadership in Hong Kong*.

⁴⁶ Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’, 81.

Most members of the conservative group came from less urbanized areas, such as Kam Tin, Tai Po Tau, etc., and were then leading an earthbound way of life. They regarded the development policies of the government as detrimental to the agricultural basis of their livelihood and therefore ominous... Members of the opposition group, hereafter referred to as the progressive group, mainly came from urbanized areas, such as Tsuen Wan, Sheung Shui and Tai Po. Most of them had started and some even succeeded in non-agricultural occupations. In contrast to the conservative group, whose members rejected development for its adverse impact on their traditional way of life, members of the progressive group were more receptive to development.⁴⁷

On a side note, it is intriguing here to note the language employed by Kuan and Lau, two of the most prominent social scientists in the discipline of Hong Kong Study. Those clans who opposed the government's development agenda in the New Territories were labelled as 'conservative' while those in support as 'progressive'. This is another example of how the hegemony of developmentalism has been built up over the years – not through government politics alone but through various discourses, academic and otherwise.

According to Chiu and Hung, frequent protests against development projects eventually prompted the colonial government to destroy the political influence of the traditional rural elite, who dominated the Kuk, and to reconstitute it into a complying institution.⁴⁸ As the interests in land and the Government's land administration policies supplied the fuse that separated the two factions, this internal feud within the Kuk

⁴⁷ Kuan and Lau, *Development and the Resuscitation of Rural Leadership in Hong Kong*, 21-23.

⁴⁸ Chiu and Hung, 'State Building and Rural Stability', 82.

provided the colonial administration with an opportunity to undertake political manipulation with the aim of supporting the Tsuen Wan faction in unseating the Yuen Long faction, who had long been leading the Kuk.⁴⁹

Apparently, the ripe opportunity for the government to do so came in the late 1950s, when the internal struggle between the two sides intensified. From the mid-1950s onwards, the control of the Kuk changed hands several times between the Yuen Long faction and the Tsuen Wan faction, due to manoeuvres on both sides. A new constitution was passed in 1955 that increased the representation of the Tsuen Wan faction, which had until then been sidelined within the organisation. At one point, Ho Chuen-yiu, Chairman of Tsuen Wan Rural Committee, was elected Chairman of the Kuk, and in May 1956, he stalled a plan by grassroots villagers to petition the Governor if the government refused to give up current land policies, restricting the conversion of private land use. The anti-development camp fought back and managed to revise the constitution again in an executive council meeting on 28 February 1957. This act was seen as a coup d'état. When the internal struggles intensified, the District Commissioner K.M.A. Barnett started secret talks with the pro-development camp. In June 1957, a letter was sent by the government to the Kuk, telling it to register under the new Societies' Ordinance (Amendment) 1957 or else the Kuk would become illegal. But the anti-development camp was defiant and on 12 July 1957, the Kuk decided for non-registration.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Lee, 'Heung Yee Kuk', 174.

⁵⁰ Chiu and Hung, 'State Building and Rural Stability'; Kuan and Lau, *Development and the Resuscitation of Rural Leadership in Hong Kong*.

On the eve of the election of office bearers for the thirteenth term of the Kuk in summer 1957, the government withdrew its recognition of the organisation as a legal entity. The District Commissioner said:

The government was concerned about some recent activities undertaken by certain people in the name of the Heung Yee Kuk. In view of the development of events, the government has concluded that the Kuk has lost its value of representation and therefore should be disqualified from recognition.⁵¹

Internal dissent was cited as the reason behind such a move. But according to Kuan and Lau, the real motive behind the government's action was to influence the internal process of dissent resolution so as to promote a new group of rural leaders who would support government's policies.⁵² On 25 November, the government introduced the Heung Yee Kuk Bill which was passed in the Legislative Council without discussion within 15 days. In moving the first reading of the bill, the Colonial Secretary said: 'The point at issue was a very simple one: those who had by then assumed control of the Kuk maintained that the Government ought to treat that body as being authoritatively representative of New Territories opinion but should at the same time in no way concern itself with the question how the Kuk officials were elected – that is to say, with the Kuk's constitution – or with the question whether the Kuk was truly representative.'⁵³ To Chiu and Hung, '[e]ssentially, the government's point was that it had to be satisfied

⁵¹ Quoted in Kuan and Lau, *Development and the Resuscitation of Rural Leadership in Hong Kong*, 24.

⁵² Kuan and Lau, *Development and the Resuscitation of Rural Leadership in Hong Kong*, 21.

⁵³ Stephen W.K. Chiu and Ho-fung Hung, *The Colonial State and Rural Protests in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997), 27.

with the composition of the HYK [Heung Yee Kuk] before it could be recognized as the representative of rural opinions.’⁵⁴

Under the Bill, Justices of the Peace appointed by the Governor were assigned ex-officio status. From then on, the chairmanship of the Kuk has been held by leaders of the Tsuen Wan faction with few exceptions. Opposition to the government could still be heard occasionally, and there were also reports of pro-Beijing elements within the Kuk. However, overall the Kuk has been very cooperative.⁵⁵ While in a more recent work about the history of Heung Yee Kuk, Victor Sit and Chi-Man Kwong would offer a more mitigated view about this historical episode, claiming the colonial administration was obliged to move cautiously to avoid provoking strong resistance in the New Territories and upsetting China-British relations,⁵⁶ scholars in general would agree on the government’s motives to intervene in the Kuk affairs, sidelining ‘trouble-makers’, such that government’s development agenda in the New Territories would not meet fierce opposition.⁵⁷ As Chun notes, after the 1950s voices of opposition to development projects were not heard in the Heung Yee Kuk anymore. Most prominent instead were negotiations for material compensations, or permissible technical specifications about the so-called Small Houses.⁵⁸

To Chun, the cleavages within the Kuk and its confrontations with the colonial government before the 1950s were more than political divisions, but were also reflective

⁵⁴ Chiu and Hung, *The Colonial State and Rural Protests in Hong Kong*, 27.

⁵⁵ Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’, 84.

⁵⁶ Kwong and Sit, *History of Heung Yee Kuk*, 141-143.

⁵⁷ Kuan and Lau, *Development and the Resuscitation of Rural Leadership in Hong Kong*; Lee, ‘Heung Yee Kuk’; Chiu and Hung, ‘State Building and Rural Stability’.

⁵⁸ Allen Chun, ‘Land Revolution in the Twentieth Century in New Territories, Hong Kong’ (香港新界在二十世紀的土地革命), *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 61 (1986): 23。

of the ‘great transformation’⁵⁹ at that time, not only in the New Territories but also at the global level, whereby market system represents the social system in the new world order, and that market activity becomes social relations, and market behaviour the rationality and value system in this new world. Values attached to land also experienced fundamental changes. The Kuk and the government were merely representing different interests and goals. To Chun, far from operating within a social vacuum, imperatives of rule and local notions of social community in the post-war era had to take into account the erosion of hard and fast cultural boundaries that were intrinsic to a previous colonial era, the systematic diffusion of a rule of law in the practice of local administration and the emergence of a global order that saw the inculcation of a market mentality as a principle of social survival.⁶⁰ The use of a legal and rational approach to govern villages in the name of the ‘rule of law’ is a way to pursue the government’s development agenda when need arises. We have seen in the above how the government used legal manipulation to disband a defiant Heung Yee Kuk in the 1950s when the need to develop new towns arose, and to install a compliant rural council such that the government can be sure to secure its cooperation in the development of the New Territories thereafter.

vi. The New Territories as a heterogeneous community

After the Heung Yee Kuk incident in 1957 whereby the government manipulated the Kuk’s internal disputes to install pro-development factions within its power structure, the Kuk has been recognised as the representative voice of New Territories interests.

According to Kwong and Sit, to study the history of Heung Yee Kuk itself is to study the

⁵⁹ Here Chun is referring to the formulation by Karl Polanyi. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston : Beacon Press, 1944).

⁶⁰ Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society*, 125.

history of the New Territories.⁶¹ This is a typical case of the tendency to claim totality by focusing on formal institutional evolution which represents only a restricted sector, overlooking the heterogeneity of population composition and its related interests in the New Territories over the past decades. For instance, Aijmer noted that immigrant farmers in the post-war period had very little to do with Village Representatives or the Rural Committee. They could not take part in elections as it was generally required that one must possess property, land and a house in a village to qualify for voting rights. Generally there was also a required period of residence, such as ten or seven years.⁶²

Studies on the New Territories have also long assumed an inherent structure of society, with a tendency to focus on kinship, even when traditional single-lineage villages are transformed into multi-surname and even multi-ethnic ones, anthropologists and historians have largely understood this process as a function of the dissolution of a kinship ideal that had been subject to the onslaught of various ‘external’ forces, mostly demographic pressure and market commoditisation.⁶³ To Chun, it is simplistic to say that changes in village composition and relationships to land follow primarily as a function of variations in a kinship ideal. It is also necessary to go beyond given dichotomies of non-indigenous/ indigenous residents, and coloniser/colonised. In any one case, change may be the result of a complex variety of influences.⁶⁴

With the ‘great transformation’ by which market principles have become the global order, agricultural land does not escape from the logic of exchangeability either. Under such entangled arrangements inherited from the colonial period, in the name of

⁶¹ Kwong and Sit, *History of Heung Yee Kuk*, 12.

⁶² Aijmer, *Atomistic Society in Sha Tin*, 259.

⁶³ Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society*, 156.

⁶⁴ Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society*, 168.

‘inalienable indigenous rights’, many rich and powerful ‘indigenous inhabitants’ (it has to be noted that not all indigenous residents are rich and powerful) are able to exploit their position in the land market with asymmetric information to reap huge profits. In this sense, they are not unlike landlords, developers and agents in the real estate market. However, this group of ‘indigenous inhabitants’ form only part of the New Territories story.

Immigrant, tenant farmers form an equally important part of the history of the New Territories, but they are relatively neglected in the anthropology of rural society in the New Territories, not to mention in discourses about ‘traditional customs’ as promoted by the Kuk. Göran Aijmer’s two monographs, namely *Economic Man in Sha Tin – Vegetable Gardeners in a Hong Kong Valley* (1980) and *Atomistic Society in Sha Tin – Immigrants in a Hong Kong Valley* (1986) that deal with agricultural tenancy and its plight are two notable exceptions.⁶⁵ In fact, Aijmer was self-conscious that he was not to produce yet another work on the ‘lineage landscape’ of the New Territories. He has diverged from this tradition and his work has concerned ‘people outside the structural order’.⁶⁶ He was also aware that his study was nothing about ‘peasant’ life as such: ‘Whatever a peasant society is, it is quite clear that nothing like peasant societies existed in the New Territories in the late 1960’s and only a romantic would describe social life in the Hong Kong countryside... as a “peasant life”’.⁶⁷

In his field study in Shatin in the late 1960s, Aijmer notes that besides the native population, there existed in the New Territories a great number of immigrants from China at that time, mostly arriving after the establishment of the People’s Republic in

⁶⁵ Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society*.

⁶⁶ Aijmer, *Economic Man in Sha Tin*, 3.

⁶⁷ Aijmer, *Atomistic Society in Sha Tin*, 15.

1949. Their presence in Shatin was strong in numbers, as was the case in most parts of the New Territories. In fact, they made up a majority of the population in most places, with the exception of inaccessible mountainous areas. According to his estimates, only about 4,000 people out of a population of perhaps 30,000 were native villagers.⁶⁸ As mentioned earlier, at his time, Aijmer noted that the immigrant farmers had very little to do with Village Representatives or the Rural Committee, and that they could not take part in elections as it was generally required that one must possess property, land and a house in a village for voting rights.⁶⁹

Aijmer's study finds that even the immigrant farmers did not form a homogeneous community in Shatin.⁷⁰ The type and location of houses where they resided varied according to their own financial situation. While sometimes immigrants lived quite close to each other, the settlement pattern was very different from traditional villages. They had not settled in village-like aggregates along traditional lines. The huts of the newcomers were scattered everywhere on the hillsides and in the fields. There were no obvious pragmatic or symbolic foci of interest which could cement these people together into groups.⁷¹

Also, there existed very few links between the native villagers and immigrants. Aijmer had the following experience shortly after embarking on his field study:

When in a village I asked someone if he knew any immigrants in that area, and, if so, whether he could introduce me to any such person, it was like the closing of a door. The general answer was 'I don't know any of them,' or 'I don't know

⁶⁸ Aijmer, *Economic Man in Sha Tin*, 3.

⁶⁹ Aijmer, *Economic Man in Sha Tin*, 259-260.

⁷⁰ Aijmer, *Economic Man in Sha Tin*.

⁷¹ Aijmer, *Atomistic Society in Sha Tin*, 109-110.

anything about them except that they work in their fields constantly and keep to themselves.’ It took me some time to understand that in such answers I had hit upon one of the most profound social features of the valley.⁷²

Despite the lack of links between the native villagers and immigrant farmers, restrictions imposed by the native population were still felt by the immigrants. Open conflicts were much more common in the early 1960s when many villagers, especially women, still carried out some rice farming. As paddy fields required a lot of water, irrigation water became a socially sensitive asset. Quarrels and the blocking of dykes arose as a result. This kind of conflict only died out with the cessation of rice growing.⁷³

However, there were other restrictions imposed by the villagers. For example, in the Keng Hau area of Shatin, new settlers were not allowed to make use of hill-side grass and shrubs for the collection of fuel and grazing of cattle. Indigenous villagers had also thrown stones at them when they fetched water from the village well.⁷⁴

Aijmer’s two monographs are original even to the present day in the sense that it has departed from the lineage discourse, which remains influential in the study of rural societies in the New Territories and South China at large. They show that the New Territories has been a place of encounters between the rural and the urban; changes have been taking place as a result of such encounters. The relations and conflicts between indigenous villagers and immigrants in the post-war years showed that rural life in the New Territories is far from romantic or idyllic, instead it is where all sorts of problems in life are exposed and ‘micro-decisions’ (e.g. irrigation matters as mentioned above) made on a daily basis, with different social forces manifesting themselves. Aijmer’s

⁷² Aijmer, *Economic Man in Sha Tin*, 7.

⁷³ Aijmer, *Atomistic Society in Sha Tin*, 232-233.

⁷⁴ Aijmer, *Atomistic Society in Sha Tin*, 233.

study thus frees us from the lineage story, whereby all transformations are understood as derivation from single-lineage societies. Such lineage theories are problematic, as there is an underlying assumption about ‘authenticity’, based on which some inhabitants would have more legitimacy over village matters than the others. We still see plenty of such arguments today: that ‘outsiders’ have lesser a say in matters concerning say, the development of a village. Also, lineage is agnatic, excluding all women in the story.

The implications of the discussions by Aijmer and Chun are that the New Territories, including Mui Wo, have always been a heterogeneous community with residents coming from different backgrounds arriving to settle in the community in different periods. They belong to different social classes and sometimes have conflicting interests. However, out of the consideration for governmentality, the colonial government fossilised customs, which are themselves ongoing negotiation between different interests, as ‘inalienable rights’ of ‘indigenous residents’, which are again defined by the date of the New Territories lease. During the drafting of the Basic Law, Heung Yee Kuk opposed to the abolishment of the geographical term ‘New Territories’ in the ‘mini-constitution’ of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region after 1997. Lau Wong-fat, Chairman of the Kuk and also member of the Drafting Committee of the Basic Law, reiterated in the Committee that the traditional rights of indigenous inhabitants were protected under the *Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory* signed in 1898. In the end, Article 40 of the Basic Law, adopted on 4 April 1990 by the Seventh National People's Congress (NPC) of the People’s Republic of China, stipulates that ‘The lawful traditional rights and interests of the indigenous

inhabitants of the “New Territories” shall be protected by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.’⁷⁵

In this way, through extending the colonial legacy and its legal arrangements into the post-1997 period, the heterogeneity of the New Territories, including Mui Wo, continued to be simplified and framed as the duality between ‘indigenous’ and ‘non-indigenous’, or ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ residents. With the land reforms introduced in the New Territories by British colonial rule and the commodification of space, the problematic is also linked to property ownership – the reification of customs due to considerations of governmentality has created a class of landlords by male inheritance. They are granted the right to extract capital values out of land by selling or renting their ‘small house’ in the market. In this way, the reification of customs also led to the reification of land, with land deprived of the cultural and social meanings associated with it, and is left with a capital value only.

As we shall see further in the thesis, the dualism of landlords and tenants, coupled with the advent of globalisation of capitalism, means that responsibilities and interpersonal relationships are increasingly defined in terms of property ownership. Users and their responsibilities are often ignored as a result. In the attempt to redevelop Mui Wo, economic considerations, e.g. its potential for attracting tourists, also pre-empt other user priorities.

vii. Urbanisation as a result of industrialisation

Post-war new town development was driven in part by changes in the territory’s economic structure that took place in the 1950s. By moving from one based primarily

⁷⁵ *The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China*, http://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter_3.html (accessed 14 July 2012).

upon trading, to one dominated by manufacturing, this change created a demand for land and provided a market for the incoming labour supply, i.e. the waves of immigrants from the Mainland of China. This factor, among others, led to the first major attempt at urban expansion and new town building. Roger Bristow noted that excluding the later public housing programmes, more land was sold to the private sector in the decade after the war for industrial purposes than it did for housing. Land production for industry continued to remain a major policy issue in subsequent decades.⁷⁶ However, as we shall see below, further changes in Hong Kong's economic production structure from one based on manufacturing to one dominated by finance and services in the 1990s, together with the advancement of the globalisation of capitalism, have led to another wave of profound transformations in the urbanscape of Hong Kong.

Tsuen Wan marked the official beginning of the Hong Kong government's new town planning, but to avoid confrontations and resettlement costs in an area with 6,000 indigenous inhabitants and innumerable squatters, the government decided to take a 'piecemeal' approach.⁷⁷ There were areas within the development zone that escaped from government planning and control, maintaining heterogeneity in the new town. As part of the first wave of new towns in Hong Kong, Tsuen Wan is generally regarded as a failed example due to the lack of comprehensive planning. However, the 'disorder' also allowed these new towns to preserve their uniqueness; all is not in order and managed. With the state machinery becoming more rationalised and professionalised in its planning approach, spatial management in new towns also became more disciplined and efficient. Shatin is generally considered as the most successful model of town planning

⁷⁶ Roger Bristow, *Hong Kong's New Towns – A Selective Review* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), 71-72.

⁷⁷ W.J. Smyly, 'Tsuen Wan Township', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 33(9) (1961): 405.

in Hong Kong for its comprehensiveness and zoning application, with single-use zones designated for different purposes, such as housing, education, leisure and transportation. In a paper reviewing the historical geographic development of this new town, Wing-shing Tang et al. propose the notion of ‘Shatin values’, born out of the new town development over a span of three decades, as emblematic of the values of Hong Kong, which emphasise order, systematisation, functionalism and professionalism. To them, this set of ‘middle-class values’ are best embodied in Shatin, and they also represent the ‘deeply rooted’ values of many people in Hong Kong, as they are the ‘epochal product of the development process of Hong Kong’.⁷⁸

To Tang et al., the clear demarcation among different land uses draws a clear division between the public and the private, defining the ways, substance and functions of living for people. Under the zoning concept, the spatial and architectural designs of different single-use zones are standardised, as are designated social and cultural activities and areas. Each activity has its corresponding spatial arrangement: to shop and consume, there is New Town Plaza; to carry out cultural activities, there is the library or Shatin Town Hall; to have leisurely or sportive activities, there is Shing Mun Riverbank, municipal park or sports stadium. ‘There is not an extra inch of land, nor is there any hybrid place. As Shatin becomes a perfect system step by step, proceduralisation, functionalisation, and self-esteemisation become the core values therein.’⁷⁹

Apart from the establishment of such ‘core values’ represented by the development of Shatin, over the past decades, the processes of new town planning also

⁷⁸ Wing Shing Tang et al., *Transcend the Core Value of the Central District by Situating it in its Historical Geogaphy: a Reversion to ‘Shain Value’* (超越中環價值的歷史地理觀——回溯「沙田價值」) (Hong Kong: The Centre for China Urban and Regional Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2007), 2.

⁷⁹ Tang et al., *Transcend the Core Value of the Central District*, 4 °

gradually became more institutionalised and rationalised. The New Territories Department was formally established on 1 August 1973, which marked the beginning of centralised control towards the development of new towns, rather than responsibilities being devolved to separate bodies for each new town; responsibilities were now divided meticulously according to the technical functions – storm drainage, sewerage, portworks, roads, amenity treatment, water supply, sewage treatment, and so on. Technical bureaucrats increasingly took over the new town development responsibilities. Later, in some cases, the new town offices were also headed by planners.⁸⁰ Land acquisition, which had been viewed as so politically sensitive that the District Commissioner was to have entire responsibility over it, was now integrated as one of the streamlined functions in a complex web of lines and responsibilities.

The organisation structure also includes the use of technical consultants in the more preliminary development stages of ‘detailed planning’ and ‘feasibility study’, and in later stages of sketch plans and design works.⁸¹ Such practice of using consultants remains in use to the present day, including the planning for the ‘facelift’ of Mui Wo. As we shall see, the engagement of technical professionals outside the government has the effect of depoliticising the development process, framing the matter as one concerned with technical details only.

These important changes in the development procedures and controls of new towns corresponded to the process of installation of bureaucratic state control. As noted by Chun, in the light of cold war tensions, and as the society of Hong Kong continued

⁸⁰ Don, J.S., ‘Organisation for Development of the New Towns in Hong Kong’, in *Symposium on ‘Social Planning in a New Town’ – Case Study: Shatin new Town* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1976), 98; Bristow, *Hong Kong’s New Towns*, 123.

⁸¹ Don, ‘Organisation for Development of the New Towns in Hong Kong’, 97-98.

the process of modernisation in the post-war period and became more integrated in the global economy, there emerged a trend toward functional professionalisation within the New Territories administration. The rule of law was routinised through an impersonal bureaucracy of clerks and records. In the end, a more efficient technology of social control was produced. The government's role in developing new towns was in this regard a significant aspect of a broader rationalising ethos that had already penetrated many levels of local life.⁸²

We note the same trend of bureaucratisation and functional professionalisation in the development of Mui Wo in the twenty-first century. For instance, drainage and sewerage works have been on-going in Mui Wo in the past few years. These works are carried out by the Drainage Services Department and its engineers. I will discuss the sewerage works in more details in Chapter 3. In the case of drainage, river flows were diverted and riverbanks straightened with large concrete slabs stacked up to form the embankment. Space is homogenised as a result of the attempt to control floods. For instance, after about two years of works, the river branch running from the village of Pak Ngan Heung through Pak Kung Bridge to join Silver River before it flows into the sea now looks just like any riverbanks in other more developed New Territories areas. Even vegetation along the river became homogenised: fragrant ginger flower fields, a specific local scene, were uprooted to accommodate the works. After the works, trees were replanted in the area by the government, but the local ginger flowers were gone.

viii. Production of a themed touristic town

I have noted at the beginning of this chapter that the government has always been intervening in the development of the New Territories. I see this as a move to

⁸² Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society*.

homogenise hitherto heterogeneous space to cope with economic development. In response to changing times and capitalistic exigencies, the development strategy of the government has also been changing. Entering the ‘post-industrial’ era and globalisation of capitalism, Mui Wo is also included in a large-scale, coordinated government plan to develop Lantau Island.

Development of Mui Wo is no longer about the need to develop new towns to cope with industrialisation, but about the need to develop a themed touristic town in a post-industrial society. The government has a theme for Mui Wo in its facelift plan: ‘Leisure Historic Rural Township’.⁸³ Ip has discussed how historical theming is a characteristic of postmodern society, whereby the ‘past’ is reduced and appropriated to produce sets of signs and images which are then translated into a variety of stylised spatial arrangements. Examples in Hong Kong include the Former Marine Headquarters in Tsimshatsui which was redeveloped into a high-end shopping complex, and the Western Market, which is a shopping centre themed on the nostalgia for the old western district. Such spaces are produced for touristic consumption. In an increasingly homogeneous society, theming is a strategy to give consumers a feel of ‘uniqueness’ to products and experiences, which are in fact characterless.⁸⁴

In the case of the ‘facelift’ plan of Mui Wo, the theme of ‘leisure historic rural township’ as baptised by the government’s planners is to endow the place with signs and images associated with the history and rurality of Mui Wo, such that tourists and consumers can have a feel of ‘uniqueness’ about the place – not that Mui Wo as a place

⁸³ Planning Department and Sai Kung & Islands District Planning Office, *Facelift of Mui Wo – Land Use Concept Plans*, http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/mui_wo/en/plan/image/note_en.pdf (accessed 3 December 2008).

⁸⁴ Ip, *Nostalgia for the Present*, 68-71.

to *live* is not unique, but to make it a place of consumption, signs and spectacles have to be produced, sometimes overriding living experiences. I will return to this point shortly.

The development of a themed touristic town is in turn related to the latest transformations of capitalism. In the 1950s, new towns were developed to cope with the needs of industrialisation; entering the 1990s, the focus of development (re)turned to the two sides of Victoria Harbour, in tandem with the advent of global capitalism, which is characterised by the redevelopment of waterfronts, the rise of hotel and convention complexes in central districts, large-scale luxury office and residential developments, and fashionable, high-priced shopping districts in the so-called global cities.⁸⁵ To compete with other Asian cities in terms of its attraction to global capital and high-income professionals Hong Kong also tries to establish itself as a global city within the region. One of the strategies is to redevelop the city centre to upgrade its office, residential, and cultural facilities. The redevelopment of the waterfront of Central and the development of West Kowloon epitomise this latest development priority.

The location of West Kowloon, a piece of reclaimed land out of the Kowloon side of the Victoria Harbour off the old districts of Jordan and Tai Kok Tsui, is home to International Commerce Centre (ICC), which is the tallest building in Hong Kong, and to the upcoming West Kowloon Cultural District. Within West Kowloon are now located an office tower, a five-star hotel, and super-luxury residential and retail developments. Landlords involved in the development of the district include Sun Hung Kai (SHK) Properties and MTR Corporation (MTRC), two of the largest developers in Hong Kong. MTRC was first established as a transport company by the government to build and operate the underground railway system in Hong Kong, but nowadays

⁸⁵ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City*, 261.

property development has become its most lucrative business. This is a reflection of how real estate development has become an end in itself. In fact, the largest property developments in Hong Kong are often linked to MTR stations; those property developments located on the podium of these stations can always command a higher price than comparable projects in other areas. This shows how mobility is highly important, especially with much of the population residing in new towns and going to work in urban areas. The development of the so-called 'Megapolis', in effect the agglomeration of neighbouring major cities, is also seen as the engine for economic growth.⁸⁶ Among others, the Hong Kong-Shenzhen-Guangzhou region is the largest in the world, with a population of approximately 120 million people.⁸⁷

West Kowloon is the terminus to the Hong Kong section of Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link (XRL), the building of which is the reason why Choi Yuen Tsuen, Shek Kong had to be demolished, thus giving rise to the social movement to fight against its destruction. As mentioned in Chapter 1, behind the construction of the 26-km Hong Kong section is the involvement of the government in the production of space, linking Hong Kong to the mainland at the conceived and symbolic levels, integrating the urban centre of Hong Kong into the national economy. Through the presence of such multinational financial institutions as Morgan Stanley, Credit Suisse and Deutsche Bank at ICC, which is owned by SHK Properties, the economy, both at the local and national levels, is in turn connected to the core of global capitalism. These financial institutions first took up their office space in West Kowloon

⁸⁶ See for example, Richard Florida, 'The New Megapolis', *Newsweek*, July 2, 2006; UN Habitat, *State of the World's Cities 2008/09*, <http://www.unhabitat.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=2562> (accessed 31 March 2013).

⁸⁷ UN Habitat, *State of the World's Cities 2008/09*.

at a deep discount compared to the rent that they would have to pay in Central, demonstrating the will to establish West Kowloon as another financial district of Hong Kong. This is a vivid example of how the government, property capital and financial capital weave together in the remaking of space in Hong Kong, such that it will be integrated in the global economy in the capacity of a mega-city in the Pearl River Delta.

Meanwhile, Lantau Island, after seeing the construction of the airport and the new town of Tung Chung in the 1990s, will become once again the site of major developments in the years to come. It will be the site to the border crossing point of the future Hong Kong – Zhuhai – Macao Bridge. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, an overall development plan has been announced which includes a ‘facelift’ plan for Mui Wo, positioning it as a ‘leisure historic rural township’ for the relaxation of holidaymakers. In this way, from the hi-speed rail with terminus in West Kowloon, to the Lantau development plan and Mui Wo ‘facelift’, they are part of the efforts to build up a megapolis within the Pearl River Delta. While West Kowloon serves the functions of the latest financial and cultural centre and upmarket residential district in this megapolis, Lantau may be said to be the infrastructure stronghold (international airport, cross-border bridge), as well as the source of mass residential supply (Tung Chung new town) and recreational facilities (Ngong Ping 360, Hongkong Disneyland). In turn, while Hongkong Disneyland is a themed park directly imported from the US, the government’s ‘facelift’ plan aims to establish the themed ‘historic rural township’ of Mui Wo with a local flavour.

ix. A Facelift plan

In late 2004, the Government proposed a *Concept Plan for Lantau* to provide an overall planning framework for the future development of Lantau Island. Within the plan, Mui Wo was positioned as a rural, touristic township for holidaymakers. Subsequently, the Planning Department drew up the *Land Use Concept Plans* (the *LUC Plans*) for the ‘facelift’ of Mui Wo in mid-2006. In June 2007, the Civil Engineering and Development Department (CEDD) commissioned Meinhardt Infrastructure and Environment, a consultancy firm, to conduct a feasibility study of the proposed works. Subsequently, another engineering consultant, Jacobs, has been commissioned by the CEDD to engage in detailed design of the project. This is a continuation of the practice of engaging consultants in government’s town planning to give a potentially controversial plan a veil of neutrality and objectivity; above all, it is an attempt to depoliticise the planning process. At an estimated cost of over HK\$300 million, the works would involve the construction of new amenities and redevelopment of existing areas in the coming few years. These include redevelopment of the pier area, addition of signage for tourists, provision of a ‘heritage trail’ and cycle track network. Works would start in 2013 upon completion of statutory procedures and funding approval.⁸⁸

As noted above, this facelift plan is part of the government’s larger plans to develop Lantau into a transport nodal point within the Pearl River Delta, especially with the construction of the Hong Kong – Zhuhai – Macao Bridge, with Lantau Island being one of the future boundary crossing points. In fact, before the British took over Hong Kong in 1842, Tai O of Lantau Island was an important trading port of the Pearl River

⁸⁸ Civil Engineering and Development Department, ‘Improvement works for Mui Wo Facelift’ <http://www.cedd.gov.hk/eng/projects/major/hki/hki7414ro.htm>, (accessed 7 October 2011).

Delta, due to its central position in the trio of Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macao.⁸⁹ In view of the latest move to focus development on the Pearl River Delta, three companies with interests in Lantau, namely Hong Kong Disneyland, Ngong Ping 360, which operates the cable car system connecting the new town of Tung Chung and Ngong Ping, near Po Lin Monastery featuring the tourist attraction of the Giant Buddha, and AsiaWorld-Expo, an exhibition and event venue near the Hong Kong International Airport, joined forces to form the Lantau Economic Development Alliance to advocate for the development of Lantau as a ‘travel, convention and exhibition, and services island’. According to the former managing director of Ngong Ping 360, Lantau has ‘rich resources’, with a number of tourist attractions like Disneyland and the Big Buddha. ‘In terms of natural landscapes, there are Tai O, Pui O, Mui Wo and large areas of country parks. The government and the private sector should think of ways to retain the visitors and to make use of travel, convention facilities on the island, such that economic benefits can be created,’ he said in a newspaper interview. The executive, together with the Hong Kong Chief Executive of Disneyland, lamented over ‘the waste of resources in Lantau’. In their opinion, places like Tai O and Mui Wo do not have many visitors even on holidays. Cheung Sha, which is located in the southern coast of Lantau, boasts a beautiful beach which stretches 2 km long, but now it is ‘only’ planned as a high-end residential zone.⁹⁰

In a supplementary article to this interview entitled ‘Seven Years Wasted: Grasp New Development Opportunities’, it is added that ‘auto-salvation’ by the private sector

⁸⁹ Hung, ‘One Thousand Years of Suppression’, 127.

⁹⁰ Chuan-qiang Deng and Hui-jun Chen, ‘Lack of Government Planning: Business Alliance to Suggest on Transforming Lantau into the Island of Tourism and Convention’ (政府缺乏規劃 業界組聯盟獻策大嶼山變身旅遊會展島), *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 16 December 2011.

would not work, as the making of an ‘island of travel’ would involve various interest groups and government departments. Even if the alliance put forward any recommendations, in the end ‘forceful implementation’ from the government will be necessary.⁹¹

The above example is an illustration of the relations between transnational capitalists and state powers. Any development works, especially of this scale, involve a long and complicated negotiation process. Despite the disaccord that may arise in the process, both the state and the transnational elites are acting at the compulsion of global capitalism. Regional metropolises are being consolidated to compete with other cities on the regional and global level and to search for ever higher profit by commanding over space and time – and hence all the talk about ‘living circles’. All such projects rely on the support of high-tech transport infrastructures such that more space can be ‘conquered’ by shortening the time to cover such spaces. The building of such infrastructure requires intervention from the government, and in many cases, more than one government, local or national, are involved. Spaces of capitalist modernity are produced not only through capitalist strategies, but also through the regulatory strategies of the state.

The Mui Wo facelift plan is thus part of the wider plan to develop Lantau into a ‘hub’ in the Pearl River Delta. With rapid urbanisation and growing affluence of the region at large, spaces with natural traits (sun, sea and greenery) have become scarce and have acquired an exchange value. Spaces of ‘nature’, with the necessary signs and symbols, have to be produced in order to realise the surplus value for capitalists (and hence the lament over ‘lost opportunities’ and time wasted). This is where expertise

⁹¹ ‘Seven Years Wasted: Grasp New Development Opportunities’ (浪費七年 把握發展新機遇), *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 16 December 2011.

comes into play in order to conceive such space. In this process, such professionals as planners, engineers, consultants from various fields (transport, landscaping, environment), as well as technocrats and bureaucrats from government, are engaged. Their knowledge instils into the conception of space, which is abstract and formal. With the support and authority of this positive knowledge, such conceived space in turn becomes dominant and prevails over the lived.

To give it a sense of legitimacy and to appease oppositions, in recent years the government does not hesitate to consult the public on its planning proposals. But there are questions over the nature of such consultations. In the case of the Mui Wo ‘facelift’ plan, consultations with residents and the public at large are held, but often they are asked to discuss technical details based on decisions already made by these professionals (for instance, seaside boardwalks are to be built, and the question is how wide they should be and which material used). During these public forums, slides showing artistic impressions and images are shown in front of the audience, who are then asked: ‘Which option do you prefer, A or B?’⁹²

In this way, such public consultations are like shopping, and residents are treated like consumers. In a consumer society, shopping and consumption substitute the place of important political choices. Fundamental issues are not on the agenda for public debate, e.g. what residents think about the desirability of a touristic town. The public is not engaged or engaging, and instead is encouraged to shop among options, which differ only in the most superficial aspects (colour, pattern).

⁹² The observations and discussions are based on my participation in at least four such public consultation forums between 2006 and 2012.

It is hard to believe anyone would genuinely wish to gather around a table to *discuss* such nitty-gritty issues as the colour of paving or pattern of fences – this much was reflected in open responses by residents in these forums: people are dissatisfied with the fact that a dozen adults gather around the table to say to each other ‘I prefer dark grey to light grey’, or ‘I prefer flower pattern to “abstract pattern”’. This is not to say these issues are unimportant. If residents can use their own hands to pave the path or paint the fences, this is engagement, through their own bodies. In contrast, when people cannot discuss what really matters to them by gathering together, they would eventually become sceptical and even cynical towards ‘public engagement’, and would just refrain from any further participation. This is precisely what has happened in these public consultations on the ‘facelift’ plan of Mui Wo. During the first couple of consultation sessions when residents could still raise their views relatively freely, i.e. without a prescribed agenda, participation and the variety of views were also high. When the sessions became more ‘organised’, with a strictly prescribed agenda and residents being divided into small groups (each group to elect a ‘representative’), it was evident that debates became less intense, not because a ‘consensus’ has been reached, but because those who oppose to the basic idea behind the facelift plan no longer came to these consultations. Those who attended and spoke tended to agree with the fundamental position of government – that is, there is a need for a top-down plan to revamp Mui Wo.

In some cases, proposals are to go ahead despite their controversy. A prominent example concerns the daily practice of cycling. According to the plan, an underground bicycle park will be built at some distance away from the pier to replace the current one just beside it. This drew heavy criticism from some residents since it would compromise

the daily, practical needs of cyclists. In an e-mail message to the Planning Department on 22 June 2008, Sally Chun, a Mui Wo resident, wrote that she ‘cannot accept the idea’ of an underground parking area. In her opinion, ‘the proposal is based more on the aim of getting the bicycles out of sight instead of respecting cycling as the way of life in Mui Wo. The primary aim should be providing user-friendly parking to the residents.’

As mentioned in Chapter 1, cycling is the predominant mode of transport within Mui Wo. There is a bicycle park adjacent to the ferry pier entrance. However, due to the lack of parking spaces and design problems of the current bicycle park (which consists of a few long rows of tightly squeezed parking stands, which many cyclists find it difficult to get access to), many residents would just leave their bicycles in non-designated areas, for instance at the entrance area to the pier.⁹³ On a number of occasions, these bicycles were forcefully removed and confiscated in joint actions by up to six government departments,⁹⁴ after which the area would be cordoned off by the police as if it were a crime scene.⁹⁵ The local district councillor has also stapled notices onto ‘illegally parked’ bicycles to warn the owners. At a local consultative forum to discuss the government’s proposal on 18 November 2006, he said the scene was ‘disorderly’ and would ‘give tourists a bad impression’– the bicycle park is the first thing to be *seen* after passengers have disembarked from the ferry. Obviously, the local district councillor and the voices that he represented did not want this situation to continue, as they think the ‘chaotic picture’ would drive potential tourists away.

⁹³ Undoubtedly some residents do so due to convenience, especially when they have to rush for a ferry about to leave.

⁹⁴ The departments are: the Islands District Office, District Lands Office, Hong Kong Police Force, Transport Department, Highways Department and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department.

⁹⁵ In such cases, owners cannot claim their bicycles back even if they are willing to pay a fine.

This example of the bicycle park illustrates the tensions between abstract space which emphasises the visual and optical, and lived space which is embodied and organic. When the ‘facelift’ proposal was still in the planning stage, I joined a small group of residents making a tour around Mui Wo together with the government town planner in charge of this project. I told the planner that I found the bicycle park a prominent characteristic of Mui Wo, but he did not agree. He did not think that the bicycle park constituted a special feature of Mui Wo, on the grounds that other new towns such as Shatin had similar bicycle parking spaces.

This view of the town planner somewhat surprised me at that time; then I realised he and I were in fact speaking on two different planes. I spoke from bodily lived experiences (character), and the planner from the abstract and detached (visual, spectacular). By ‘bicycle park’, I denoted daily experiences of residents, by which many feelings and memories were conjured up. I would think of how residents ride their bike each day to the pier, park it there, hop the ferry, and pick it up again later in the day after getting off the ferry. It is not merely a still object, but is organically related to our bodily movements and everyday life. From the location of the bike, you can tell something about the owner. Those who have their bike parked under the roof on rainy days are probably relatively well dressed people – they do not want to get their clothes wet. Bikes parked nearest to the pier (especially those obstructing accesses) usually belong to people who are always in a hurry. Those that are parked farthest from the pier would probably mean that their owners have ample time before the ferry departs – and hence are people who plan ahead. In this sense, the bicycle park, together with all the bicycles parked there, is like a topography of personalities.

In metropolitan life, emotions are often what are absent in our relationships with the environment and with each other. Georg Simmel has noted that money economy and the dominance of the intellect are intrinsically connected in the metropolis. They share a 'matter-of-fact attitude' in dealing with things and with humans, in which there is an inconsiderate hardness. The intellectually sophisticated person is indifferent to all genuine individuality, because relationships and reactions cannot be fully explained by logical operations. Meanwhile, money is concerned only with what is common to all, asking for exchange value and reducing all quality and individuality to the question: How much?⁹⁶

When the planner said the bicycle park had 'nothing special', he was adopting the blasé attitude of the metropolitan man and was speaking from a distance, in search of the spectacle. As a town planner, affectivity is absent from the positive knowledge that he represents. He had only the government agenda in mind: to develop Mui Wo into a touristic town, in which what counts are the associated symbols and signs. We have already discussed the homogeneity of abstract space. Think about all the seaside resorts. Lying on the poolside of a five-star hotel resort, you cannot really tell whether you are in Phuket, Sanya or Bali. What count are the signs and symbols proper to a 'resort'—jacuzzi, bars and restaurants, for instance – comparing like with like (homogeneity). People would pay to be in spaces with a 'flea market', a 'heritage trail' as they are the proper signs of a 'tourist town', and it is important that they be named as such – as a 'flea market', and as a 'heritage trail'. In this way, these spaces acquire exchangeability.

Likewise, natural traits also acquire an exchange value if they are associated with the proper signs and symbols. As a resident of Mui Wo wrote in an email dated 10

⁹⁶ Georg Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, ed. Mike Featherstone and David Frisby (London: Sage, 1997), 176.

January 2007 to the Planning Department, there are already roads connecting different parts of Mui Wo, including a main access leading all the way from the old town to the Silvermine Cave and Silvermine Waterfalls. In addition to ‘heritage spots’, along the way there are beautiful landscapes, various plants and quiet corners. She did not see the need for the path to be named ‘heritage trail’. For this resident, the path is rich in experiences – not just heritage but also living plants; not just activity but also tranquillity. And she based her experiences not just on the visual, but on other senses such as hearing (quiet corners). Whereas the planner uses above all his eyes, to which Silvermine Cave is ‘nothing’, possessing no (exchange) value until ‘Silvermine Cave’ appears in guidebooks, websites and road signs. Hence, the addition of tourist-intended signage figures so prominently in the ‘facelift’ plan of Mui Wo.

In view of this, a mundane, everyday cycle park intended for local residents lacks the signs and symbols of a tourist town. It has only use value but not exchange value. It is not surprising then that in the eyes of the planner, it has ‘nothing special’. Meinhardt, the consultancy firm appointed by the government to carry out the feasibility study of the development plan in Mui Wo, proposed to build an *underground* bicycle park to replace the current open-air parking areas next to the pier. Under this proposal, bicycle parking spaces would be moved further away from the pier, and the vacated space would constitute part of an ‘entrance plaza’ intended for visitors. If placed underground, bicycles parked at the pier will be hid from eye-sight.

Despite all the references to ‘residents’, clearly the whole concept plan has largely tourists in mind. This is evident in the Chinese version of the plan where it says: ‘The objective of this plan is to create a delightful and relaxing place for local residents and

visitors to appreciate the natural beauties and the rustic culture of the area on foot or by cycle, *enjoying a relaxing day*'.⁹⁷ Residents are here to stay every day. It is the tourist who would 'enjoy a day' in an exotic place with 'natural beauties' and a 'rustic culture'.

The plan also contains a cliché about leisure – 'relaxing'. Adorno and Horkheimer, in their critique of the culture industry, already pointed out the phoniness of entertainment. According to them, amusement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is shown. But in fact, it is powerlessness. It is indeed escape, but not from bad reality as it claims, but from the last thought of resisting that reality.⁹⁸ Viewed in this way, entertainment and amusement serve the interests of the ruling elite. Under capitalism, amusement is simply the prolongation of work. It is an escape from the mechanised work process, but not in the least permanently. On the contrary, the ultimate aim of amusement is to let workers recruit strength in order to be able to cope with work again.⁹⁹ This discussion by Adorno and Horkheimer still has a strong relevance in the context of Hong Kong today – 'recharge' as a metaphor for holidaymaking is common among workers in Hong Kong. There is an assumption that the purpose of getting away from work is to let oneself be recharged with strength such that s/he can return to work in a better form.

x. User responsibilities

According to Lefebvre, the state becomes more and more clearly the agent, even the guiding hand, of the production of space.¹⁰⁰ In what he qualified as the space of state

⁹⁷ Planning Department and Sai Kung and Islands District Planning Office, 'Facelift of Mui Wo: Land Use Concept Plans (Chinese Version)' (Hong Kong: Planning Department and Sai Kung and Islands District Planning Office, 2006), 1. [my translation and emphasis]

⁹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2002), 144.

⁹⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 137.

¹⁰⁰ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 228.

mode of production (SMP), not only everyday life is programmed and idealised through manipulated consumption but also that spatiality is hierarchized to distinguish noble spaces from vulgar ones, and residential spaces from other spaces. It also implies a bureaucratic centrality, termed ‘civic’ (significantly, the plaza in Mui Wo Old Town is named ‘Civic Square’) but occupied by the decision-making powers. It is a space organised in such a way that, unless they revolt, ‘users’ are reduced to passivity and silence.¹⁰¹

To this proposition by Lefebvre, I would add that, by remaining ‘passive’ and ‘silent’, users are also reinforcing bureaucratic centrality, which often acts in the name of service provision, but which in fact is a form of power. Users are not entirely innocent and helpless, but instead have a responsibility that they cannot avoid. By taking a silent and passive position, users of space are making choices proactively – in the sense of people *not* taking responsibility for what they produce and discharge. In modern, consumerist society, this kind of ‘passivity’ has been taken for granted. As ‘consumers’, people pay in exchange for the services of others (including government services) to clean up after them. Space becomes increasingly managed to the point of over-management - and this is done by third party. Under the call of ‘consumer rights’, people no longer assume their own responsibility. This ‘contracted out’ responsibility will eventually hit back – in many residential areas, residents are told what to do and what not by management companies in daily life, and they lose their autonomy in life even at home. By insisting on consumer rights with seemingly an array of choices of lifestyles, people end up losing their basic user rights.

¹⁰¹ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 235.

Private property, the tenet of capitalism, also becomes the key to define one's relations with and responsibilities towards space. However, where the urban intersects with the rural, such assumptions are no longer taken for granted, and contradictions and even conflicts may arise. Rural practices often assume a certain degree of autonomy and self-governance, which imply user rights and responsibilities. We have seen earlier that there was a permanent tenancy system in the New Territories in traditional times. The tenant possessed the top soil or the right of cultivation (use). As long as the tenant paid his rent, he had a perpetual right to farm the land. In the language of some indigenous residents of Mui Wo today, for instance, they still refer to the occupants of a house as 'master of house' (屋主), even if they are tenants. The idea behind is that users have precedence over property owners. Unlike consumers, users have an active role to play in everyday life, and are far from passive or silent. Problems and conflicts will arise if users do not undertake their own responsibility – this phenomenon is more rampant as more urbanites are moving to the countryside. They are moving the urban with them – tenants are like consumers; since they have paid their rent, the landlord is thought to be entirely responsible for problems relating to the house. Such consumerist attitude does not encourage responsible use and is giving impetus to bureaucratic power and abstract space, since only dominant power and space have the capacity to take over the responsibility at the collective level. If, due to overuse, the septic tank overflows once a month, people would welcome government development works to lay the sewerage pipes, connecting their houses to the centralised system. Thereafter, they pay the government to clean up after them. In this sense, users (consumers) are not that passive

anymore, and are the driving force behind consumerism, which in turn leads to developmentalism.

The technicalities of the facelift plan of Mui Wo started off with the Planning Department of the Hong Kong SAR government. The body is assumed in user rights and responsibilities, whereas town planning is the combination of the ‘material’ and the ‘visual’. The visual is controlling. We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.¹⁰² The visual sense enables people to take possession of objects and environments, often at a distance. It facilitates the world of the ‘other’ to be controlled from afar, combining detachment and mastery. It is by seeking distance that a proper ‘view’ is gained, abstracted from the hustle and bustle of everyday experience. Areas of wild, barren nature, which were once sources of sublime terror and fear, were transformed into what Raymond Williams terms ‘scenery, landscape, image, fresh air’, places waiting at a distance for visual consumption by those visiting from towns and cities full of ‘dark satanic mills’.¹⁰³ Today, people would be coming from the urban jungle filled with skyscrapers, expecting to consume visually at a distance these places with ‘scenery, landscape, image, fresh air’.

xi. When the Silver Bauhinia statue lands on Mui Wo

Meanwhile, the capacity to lay the plan over the space of the city, to render its vision concrete in the built environment, is taken as a sign of the capacity of the modern state to penetrate and organise life in public.¹⁰⁴ In the *Land Use Concept Plans* drawn up by government town planners, there is a proposal to ‘beautify’ the old town of Mui Wo:

Beautification of Mui Wo Old Town

¹⁰² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972), 8.

¹⁰³ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 2002), 147.

¹⁰⁴ Karen Wells, ‘The Material and Visual Cultures of Cities’, *Space and Culture* 10, 2 (2007): 140.

The existing Old Town would be retained and enriched with traditional style streetlights and paving. The improvement of streetscape would cover Mui Wo Rural Committee Road, Mui Wo Chung Hau Street and the neighbouring streets.¹⁰⁵

Beauty is an aesthetic judgment that in turn is related to education and social origin. The predominant art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class.¹⁰⁶ To Pierre Bourdieu, the ‘eye’ is a product of history reproduced by education, and tastes function as markers of class. A popular aesthetic is based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function.¹⁰⁷ To clear objects which form part and parcel of life from social space by saying they are ‘ugly’ (in the case of the bicycle park, because the bicycles there are said to be disorderly and off-putting to tourists), and to allow (or install) objects which are detached from life in public space by saying they are ‘beautiful’ or ‘beautifying’, is to negate lived, bodily experiences using an eye detached from daily life. As such, building an ‘entrance plaza’ at the pier to serve tourists, replacing the bicycle park intended for residents, will change the everyday life of residents forever. As John Urry has noted, given the emphasis on tourist consumption as visual, and given the universalisation of the tourist gaze, places have come to construct themselves as objects of such gaze – we have noted earlier that the district councillor thought the scene at the bicycle park in Mui Wo was ‘disorderly’ and would ‘give tourists a bad impression’; this was why he thought ‘illegally parked’ bicycles should be removed. At the same time, the

¹⁰⁵ Sai Kung & Islands District Planning Office, *Facelift of Mui Wo – Land Use Concept Plans* (Hong Kong: Planning Department, 2006), 1-2.

¹⁰⁶ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 86.

¹⁰⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 3-7.

gaze of the tourist will involve an intrusion into people's lives. Such universalisation of the tourist gaze results in the fact that the mere sightseeing tourist is going to pre-empt the daily need of residents. In this way, sight may be viewed as the most superficial of the senses getting in the way of real experiences that should involve the other senses and necessitate long periods of time in order for proper immersion.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, Karen Wells notes that to mark its symbols of rule, the government is tempted to construct monuments and memorials in public spaces, but often this is met with a failure to impress the significance of these symbols on the population.¹⁰⁹ The proposed installation of a 'Silver Bauhinia' statue, and the setting up of an 'Olympic trail' are such examples of the introduction of state presence. To Wells' proposition, I would add that pro-government agents are often no less eager than the government itself to impress the public with state rule. The suggestion to build a Silver Bauhinia statue, reminiscent of the Golden Bauhinia statue in Wanchai, as a 'landmark' in the town square of Mui Wo, is understood to have come from the Rural Committee of Mui Wo. At the consultation forum organised by the government on 18 November 2006, a number of residents voiced their opposition to this installation. In response, planning bureaucrats said this was a proposal raised by the Rural Committee.¹¹⁰ I understand this

¹⁰⁸ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*.

¹⁰⁹ Karen Wells, 'The Material and Visual Cultures of Cities': 139.

¹¹⁰ The consultation report published in June 2007 acknowledged 'there were mixed views on the landmark feature to be placed in the Square'. See Planning Department and Sai Kung and Islands District Planning Office, *Facelift of Mui Wo - Land Use Concept Plans Consultation Report*, http://www.pland.gov.hk/mui_wo/en/report/image/report.pdf (accessed 5 December 2008). There was no more indication of a 'Possible Silver Bauhinia Statue' in the *Consultation Digest* distributed at the public forum on 31 May 2008. See Civil Engineering and Development Department and Meinhardt Infrastructure and Environment Ltd, *Facelift of Mui Wo - Second Public Forum Consultation Digest* (Hong Kong: CEDD and Meinhardt, 2008). But when clarification was sought from the planners attending the forum as to the status of the statue plan, no definite answer was provided.

to be a mere defensive response by bureaucrats who did not want to get embroiled in the polemics surrounding a proposal that was not raised by them in the first place.

The Golden Bauhinia statue is closely associated with the resumption of sovereign power over Hong Kong by the Chinese government. It is a gift from the Central government to Hong Kong to mark the handover in 1997. The daily flag hoisting ceremony is held at the Golden Bauhinia Square. It is also a must-see spot for tour groups from mainland China. The Rural Committee of Mui Wo might have wanted a Silver Bauhinia statue to draw visitors, and/or to show its allegiance to Beijing. Whatever its motives are, such a statue will have the effect of impressing the public with state power. Even before the installation of such a statue, the name ‘Silver Bauhinia Square’, which has appeared in leaflets promoting activities held by the Committee, will achieve the same effect.

Subsequently, in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in August 2008, a series of ‘road signs’ – in effect an identical set of structures with the Olympic rings and the words ‘This way to Hong Kong Olympic Trail’ – were erected in a number of places across Mui Wo. The Beijing Olympics was an opportunity seized by the Chinese government to demonstrate its position as a rising power on world stage. In the context of Hong Kong, showing support for the Beijing Olympics was a way to represent one’s allegiance to the Central government. Like the eventual installation of a Silver Bauhinia statue, the Olympic road signs attempt to impress the public with (central) government authority. However, as discussed above, such efforts to erect structures in public spaces often meet with the failure to impress the significance of these symbols on the local population. To some residents, these signs have been parachuted in overnight and are

totally unrelated to local spaces and lived experiences. Upon seeing one of the Olympic road signs, a friend of mine visiting Mui Wo was bemused and asked me: ‘What has the Olympics got to do with Mui Wo?... It is not related to the place.’ I could not agree with him more. In fact, the same signs can be placed anywhere – from the bustling streets in Mongkok to upscale malls in Central – but at the same time they point to nowhere. It is supposed to be a road sign but paradoxically, it is deterritorial and conjures up no sense of place whatsoever. It is a representation of the mediated ‘Beijing Olympics 2008’, and is not related to the history or memory of any place – not even Beijing as a living place for Beijing residents – and fails to generate any emotional or rational sense among local inhabitants.

When the *Land Use Concept Plans of Mui Wo* were presented at consultation forums for residents with their proper scales, graphic representations, curves and lines, some residents found it hard to relate it to the place that they know and live in. In daily life, residents refer to various spots not so much by official names or addresses, but rather by the plants and trees nearby, geographical features, shops, houses of people whom they know (e.g. where Granny Ho lived), or activities (e.g. where Uncle Mok sold his tofu dessert). Many visitors to Mui Wo navigate the place through memories or by asking their way from local residents. Even long-time residents can easily get lost in the labyrinth of houses in a neighbouring village if they only know the house number, as the numbering appears not in chronological order. I had lived in a small village of about 20 houses for three years. Due to exposed wires, internet services broke down at an average rate of about once every two months. The servicemen from PCCW, the telephone and internet service provider, who are all local residents themselves, never managed to find

my house by looking at the address alone and needed to call to ask for directions on every visit. This lack of ‘order’ actually helps to create human contact among neighbours and strangers alike. Dialectically, it also creates order of some sort in the place – outsiders to the village are obliged to ask their way, and residents feel obliged to converse with any stranger in the village, whether as an offer of help or as a measure of precaution.

Representational spaces do not need to obey any rules of consistency or cohesiveness. Evoking imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history – in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people.¹¹¹ On the contrary, abstract space negates memory, imagination, and emotions connected to space. This is one of the reasons why the Mui Wo facelift plan, or any plan imposed from above for that matter, is seen by many as unacceptable. By building an entrance plaza for tourists at the pier to replace the bicycle park, or by parachuting in a Silver Bauhinia statue in the town square which used to be one of the few remaining places in Mui Wo where one could find grazing and resting cattle, the memory, imagination and emotions that residents harbour towards the place are negated.

¹¹¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 41.

Chapter 3 Taking care of our own waste

At the initiative of the Environmental Protection Department (EPD), a centralised sewerage system was built throughout Mui Wo from 2009. Before the works, the sewerage system only covered the centre of the rural town (mainly the private apartment blocks and the public housing estate near the ferry pier). The government's plan was to lay sewerage pipes connecting individual houses in all villages to the central pipes. This would replace the septic tanks that are used in most village houses.

This chapter tries to examine how the representation of the rural as 'backward' and 'inferior' to the urban order is related to the construction of the sewerage system and the replacement of the septic tanks, which can be understood as the chasing away of 'dirt' in Mary Douglas's sense. I argue that the sewerage system is another example of developmentalism, which is further propelled by the globalisation of capitalism. I also analyse how the globally mobile 'transnational capitalist class', as one of the most important building blocks of globalisation, gives additional force to the ideology of development. Finally, I look at how the transformation of waste can create new values.

i. Dirt as matter of out of place

Difference is an important theme in representation. From the anthropological approach, culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. The marking of difference is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture.¹ Difference, as well as how we treat difference, has always been an issue and challenge in human societies, where cooperation among different members is essential. However, one major distinction

¹ Stuart Hall, 'The Spectacle of the Other', in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 236.

between modern and pre-modern society is the de-skilling in modern labour. With mechanisation, worker skills are limited to the most simple and mundane tasks. Unlike craftsman, modern workers can no longer relate what they do to themselves and the larger world. Richard Sennett argues that such changes in modern labour have weakened the desire and the capacity to cooperate with those who differ. Within modern organisations, people work in isolation and do not stay long in their positions, as a result they can only develop superficial social relations. This will produce what Sennett calls a new character type. 'This is the sort of person bent on reducing the anxieties which differences can inspire, whether these be political, racial, religious, ethnic or erotic in character. The person's goal is to avoid arousal, to feel as little stimulated by deep differences as possible.' Aside from withdrawal, Sennett notes that this avoidance will also give rise to cultural homogenisation. He notes an 'endless' globalised list of homogenised architecture, clothing, pop music and fast food cultures.² Of course, what Sennett points out here are a result of globalisation of economy and consumerism. However, on every corner of the world, there are consumers looking for McDonald's hamburgers and Gap's jeans wherever they go. From the consumer's viewpoint, this 'homogenisation of taste' is actually an anxiety of difference. "Everyone is basically the same" expresses a neutrality-seeking view of the world. The desire to neutralise difference, to domesticate it, arises... from an anxiety about difference, which intersects with the economics of global consumer culture. One result is to weaken the impulse to cooperate with those who remain intractably Other.'³

² Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (London: Penguin, 2013), 7-9.

³ Sennett, *Together*, 8.

This discussion about homogenisation of taste in modern society can be extended to homogenisation of lifestyle. If fast food or pop music is the intersection of anxiety of difference with global consumerism, the central sewer can be said to be the intersection of anxiety of difference with global modernity. As we shall see further in this chapter, hygiene has become one of the markers of modernity. From the viewpoint of the user, to have the central sewer to replace the septic tank or the dry toilet, is to settle the anxiety of deep differences when Mui Wo is becoming a place of encounters of people with various ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds. The different practices that people have towards handling of their waste can provoke anxiety as it reveals deep-rooted values and our relations with the world. Yet, these people who differ are now going to live in the same community. As noted above, the modern character is one who bent on reducing anxieties and to avoid arousal by difference, and yet in society, differences among people are always a given. One way then is to invite a third-party to settle conflicts. This is why modern environment is increasingly managed by property managers. As we shall see in Chapter 5, government agents are also invited to intervene in village affairs. Another way to settle differences is to re-organise the environment where we live; this will be the focus of this chapter.

As I am going to argue, from a cultural perspective, behind the developmentalism that we are witnessing today is the attempt to organise the environment according to an accepted pattern to homogenise space and to avoid difference. During the process, what that fits a system of classification is created to maintain the pattern. Any system, which is conservative in nature, is always subject to challenges. According to Mary Douglas,

pollution and dangers are markers to warn transgressors who threaten to upset system boundaries. 'Dirt' is also symbolic, a matter of out of place.

[Dirt] implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.⁴

Following the argument of Douglas, if dirt is matter out of place, development, through bulldozing structures that are out of place by measure of the dominant system, is the effort to exclude dirt such that a certain order can be upheld.

Going back to the theme of representing difference, an anomaly can be understood as difference against a given order, something that is 'normal' and 'expected'. Similarly, dirt, pollution and danger can all be seen as unwanted difference in a set of ordered relations. While difference *per se* does not necessarily imply any unequal relations, it is clear in practical application when we speak of difference in a social setting, power relations are involved.

Douglas has already noted the relativity of the concept of dirt, which will vary over time and place. Think about the septic tank that has been in use for years in the rural areas of Hong Kong. It was not dirt in the past, but the same septic tank design has nowadays become dirt with the advent of forces of urbanisation and globalisation. Having said this, when other priorities emerge (in the name of Feng Shui for instance), the centralised sewerage system becomes dirt in a particular village (while it is 'clean' in other villages). In other words, the septic tank remains non-dirt in one village while it becomes dirt in others.

⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.

In the case of Mui Wo, if we follow Douglas' framework, either we see Hong Kong at large as the paradigm and how Mui Wo and its local indigenous people are polluting and their practices 'dirt'; or we see Mui Wo as the paradigm and how urban Hong Kong threatens to transgress local boundaries. However, I find in reality the two entities (or any other entities for that matter) are not in such a binary opposition. In using the concept of dirt to analyse the building of a centralised sewerage system in Mui Wo, I find that at times the urban / global is the established order while practices in Mui Wo become dirt, and other times it is the other way round: Mui Wo is the order while practices coming from outside are unclean and even dangerous. Here, two or more orders co-exist and enter into power relations. I think this dynamics can only be accounted for if we understand Mui Wo as a place that retains some rural practices in a largely urban setting (Hong Kong at large), which in turn is subject to forces of globalisation. In other words, as I see it, there are at least three orders that are at work here.

What are the outcomes when the three orders intersect with each other? Based on Douglas' insightful framework, I suggest we further consider the functioning of power and stereotype.

ii. Stereotype

Hall understood power in representation in the Foucauldian sense. It includes the power to represent someone or something in a certain way, as well as the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices. Stereotyping is a key element in the exercise of symbolic violence.⁵

⁵ Hall, 'The Spectacle of the Other', 259.

As Hall saw it, stereotyping as a signifying practice is central to the representation of racial difference. He went on to discuss how coloured men and women are represented by Europeans / whites. In other words, in his discussions stereotyping is largely stereotyping of coloured peoples by whites, the two being in unequal power relations.⁶

Similarly, in *Orientalism*, Edward Said discussed how the representation of ‘Orient’ as backward and inferior in Europe and by Europeans is a matter of power and domination, involving a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans. In the view of Said, the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures is what made European culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness.⁷

In the context of Hong Kong, G Alex Bremner and David Lung noted that in the early twentieth century, Europeans residing in Hong Kong demanded racial segregation from the Chinese, since the latter ‘had come to represent all that was irrational, insanitary, and uncivilized’. The Chinese, crowded in their native quarter of Tai Ping Shan, epitomized all that was other-than European civility and order. They embodied ‘darkness, noise, disease and disorder’.⁸

It is obvious that differences do exist ‘internally’ among people of the same race and nation, and that between different social groups, there are also unequal power

⁶ Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the Other’.

⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 7.

⁸ G Alex Bremner and D P Y Lung, ‘Spaces of exclusion: the significance of cultural identity in the formation of European residential districts in British Hong Kong, 1877 – 1904’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21(2)(2003): 239.

relations, in many cases no less severe than inequalities among different races. Without dismissing stereotypes along boundaries such as race, civilisation and nation, I would argue that in the era of globalisation, stereotyping internal to the boundaries of race, civilisation and nation is at least as important as that between them. In Mui Wo, the increasingly strong presence of the transnational capitalist class highlights this ‘internal stereotyping’, whereby some residents of Chinese origin with a western educational background and lifestyle would hold stereotypical views of their indigenous compatriots.

In putting forward his argument on global modernity, Arif Dirlik notes that globalisation has been accompanied by the return of traditions that have given rise to not only ‘clashes between civilisations’ but also cultural divisions internal to so-called civilisations as well as nations.⁹ China is a site to this phenomenon as the country becomes more integrated into the global economy, by which a layer of middle-class has emerged along the coastal regions, standing in sharp contrast to poorer regions in the centre and the West. Edward Friedman notes how the major economic beneficiaries of economic reforms in China utilise stereotyped notions of backwardness with reference to the populations of the disadvantaged regions. Rural migrants who do the dirty work for low wages that dynamises urban growth are disparaged as ‘urban peasants’, ‘outsiders’, ‘hoodlums’ and ‘vagrants’ who are sources of crime, dirt, and disorder.¹⁰

The kind of stereotype used by urban elites to distinguish themselves from the poorer masses is not new. Much earlier the Chinese coastal elite *internalised* imperialist notions of Chinese ‘lack’, but they projected it on the lower classes and the interior.

⁹ Dirlik, *Global Modernity*, 30.

¹⁰ Edward Friedman, ‘Jiang Zemin’s Successors and China’s Growing Rich-Poor Gap’, in *China Under Hu Jintao*, ed. T. J. Cheng, Jacques deLisle, and Deborah Brown (Singapore: World Scientific Publishers, 2006), 100 – 112.

According to Ruth Rogaski, the Boxer Uprising and its aftermath saw the consolidation of *weisheng* as hygienic modernity, a central gauge of civilisational superiority, and the reconfiguration of *weisheng* as a marker of Chinese inferiority. *Weisheng* became a science instructed by foreigners. Soon Chinese elites also used *Weisheng* to mark their difference from the peasants and the urban poor. Going back to our earlier discussion, this may be seen as Orientalism existing both among Chinese as well as foreigners (in this case Europeans and Japanese). In other words, the foreign occupation may have brought about a violent rupture with the past, but at the same time it exacerbated a spatial rupture that existed between treaty-port elites and the denizens of the hinterland. The elites would not endure the burden of deficiency, hygienic or otherwise, and could best resist its onus by embracing modernity and its imperial agents. As a result, the Chinese peasantry and urban underclass were left to carry the label of hygienic deficiency, while Chinese elites worked at negotiating their status between the unwashed masses and the more ‘senior members’ of the global hygienic order.¹¹

By stereotyping their less advantaged compatriots, the elites could distance themselves from those stereotyped traits. At the same time they could negotiate their own place in this global hygienic order, through the consumption of foreign health products. By purchasing imported hygienic goods that circulated on a global market (Dr. William’s Pink Pills, Lysol, American Standard toilets), the moneyed treaty-port resident could imagine herself as an equal partaker of a global hygienic modernity. By coating themselves with international supplements and disinfectants, these Chinese elites could meet global standards for health and happiness. However, the ease of obtaining

¹¹ Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: meanings of health and disease in treaty-port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 191-192.

this liberation, anyway for those with the money to buy it, belied the underlying ambivalence of the project and the pronounced strategies of bifurcation it required.¹²

Back to our days, I did not have a firsthand taste of how the rural is stereotyped in the largely urban Hong Kong culture until I became a resident of Mui Wo in 2005. Since then some of my colleagues and friends, many of whom are urban middle class, could not refer to my new place of residence without making fun out of it ('When are you going back to civilisation from the jungle?') or expressing their amazement ('You are so brave to live in such isolation!'). A friend criticised my increasing 'lack of manner' (for I would hold a toothpick between my teeth while speaking to him), that I am being more and more like 'those villagers'. It has to be emphasised that I retain much of the urban lifestyle and commute regularly to urban Hong Kong for work and classes. If I can be laughed at for being 'rural', I can understand how much more my neighbours who were born here are being stereotyped.

However, with the advent of development, Mui Wo is also on the way of becoming more 'urbanised'. By 'urbanised' it does not necessarily mean that high-rise blocks are being built in the place – the government has stressed that the 'rural character' of Mui Wo would be retained, virtually ruling out the possibility of zoning the place for high-rises. Rather, much in the vein of avoidance of dirt and difference, through development works, government, developers, landlords and residents alike are re-ordering the environment, making it conform to an idea. According to Douglas, our dirt-avoidance is a 'creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience'.¹³

¹² Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 251.

¹³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 2.

iii. Developmentalism as a result of globalisation

The globalization of capitalism has given additional force to the ideology of development, or ‘developmentalism’, which forces all societies under the threat of extinction to acquire the technologies of knowledge that contribute to this end. These knowledges are no longer just ‘European’ or ‘American’ but internal to societies worldwide that provide the personnel for the global institutions of capital.¹⁴

While rural life is much stereotyped in the mainstream, urban culture, the ‘pristine’, ‘natural’ environment that the rural provides conforms to yet another set of ideas about ‘ideal living’, especially in the light of pollutions of all sorts in urban Hong Kong. This is why many urban dwellers, myself included, have moved to a rural village in the first place. As we shall see later, the construction of the sewer will bring pollution to the place, and so some residents oppose to the building of the central sewer on such grounds.

When asked why a centralised sewerage system is necessary in Mui Wo, the Environmental Protection Officer responsible for the project said in an interview that as the population in Mui Wo increases and more houses are built, eventually a centralised sewerage system would be needed to cope with the rising demand. Also, in the eyes of the government, the rural ought to be on a par with the urban: ‘Urbanised areas in Hong Kong have already sewerage pipes in place, and so we think the Islands and the New Territories should also reach the urban standard.’ The ultimate aim is to connect all rural villages in Hong Kong to a centralised sewerage system. According to the officer, the sewerage system will extend into the New Territories including Northern District, Yuen Long, Tuen Mun, Shum Tseng, Ting Kau, Fanling, Sheung Shui. As for the Islands,

¹⁴ Dirlik, *Global Modernity*, 82-83.

including Mui Wo, Tai O, south Lantau, Cheung Chau, Lamma, Peng Chau, ‘we want to extend (the system) to these areas as much as possible. Mui Wo is one of the earliest.’

Roger Bristow notes that the first real attempt at imposing rigorous standards for building in Hong Kong by the colonial government arose out of public health concerns. British sanitarians like Osbert Chadwick came to Hong Kong to finish his reports of 1882 and 1902 on sanitary conditions in the territory. Back home in the UK, he sought to improve conditions of slums in Victoria times by such measures as providing proper sewerage and water supplies, fixing minimum standards for street-widths and construction of dwellings and appointing medical officers of health. Identical measures were suggested for Hong Kong.¹⁵ Chadwick’s attempt was another example of colonisers seeing colonies as a ‘laboratory of modernity’ for their new knowledges by experimenting their public health measures there. Peckham and Pomfret note that the colonial city, whether French or British, from South Asia through Southeast Asia, and along the China coast, has been viewed as a laboratory where Western rationalism could be imposed upon ‘rampant sensuality, irrationality and decadence’. It was thought that colonies were ‘neutral testing grounds’, places where missionaries, educators, and doctors could carry out experiments in social engineering without confronting the popular resistances and bourgeois rigidity of European society.¹⁶

However, instead of sterile ‘laboratories’, colonies are inhabited by peoples with their proper history and culture. These colonial administrators and planners often overlooked the tensions and conflicts that will be provoked by the implementation of

¹⁵ Bristow, *Hong Kong’s New Towns*, 7.

¹⁶ Robert Peckham and David M. Pomfret, introduction to *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene, and Cultures of Planning in Asia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 12-13.

such plans.¹⁷ In Hong Kong, the sanitary measures imposed on buildings were criticised by Chinese landlords and social elites, who accused the colonial administration of interfering with local Chinese customs and ways of living. Under the leadership of Ho Kai, a prominent Hong Kong Chinese figure, 47,000 signatures were collected to oppose to the Public Health Ordinance. In 1888, Ho, who had been appointed to the Sanitary Board, noted that these measures were devised according to the situation of British towns and they should not be used to control Chinese buildings.¹⁸

In other words, in Hong Kong as in other colonial cities, constructing the sewer has been one way for colonial administrators to experiment their knowledge on the ‘decadent’, and to bring the territory up to the ‘modern’ living standard, but such modernisation measures have triggered opposition from the Chinese community, as they saw these as an interference with their ways of living. In our days, without a centralised sewerage system, Mui Wo and other areas that are still using the septic tank represent dirt in the dominant system. With sewerage pipes, these areas would conform more to the idea of a place for ‘modern living’. But as we shall see, these modernisation works were also going to trigger opposition from a group of rural villagers who hold a set of worldviews different from modern rationality. Moreover, it is important to note that the government is not the only one behind all such development moves, which in some ways are also driven by local sectors, including holiday-home owners, who have demanded to install a central sewerage system in the hope that water quality in the Silvermine Bay will improve, thus drawing more holidaymakers to Mui Wo.

¹⁷ Peckham and Pomfret, introduction to *Imperial Contagions*, 12.

¹⁸ Iam-chong Ip, ‘The Birth of a Hygienic City: the Colonial Construct of Early Hong Kong Public Housing’ (一個衛生城市的誕生：香港早期公共房屋的殖民建構), *Cities and Design* 13/14 (2003): 350.

In addition, the increasingly significant presence of the transnational capitalist class (TCC) in Mui Wo is instrumental in adding impetus to developmentalism in the community. Through their presence, both the urban order and forces of globalisation are brought into interaction with the local order. As noted in my discussions in Chapter 1 based on Leslie Sklair's definition of TCC,¹⁹ this new class is composed of corporate executives and their local affiliates, globalising bureaucrats and politicians, globalising professionals, consumerist elites and educators. This profile matches the professional occupations of many residents who have settled in Mui Wo in recent years. In the culture-ideology sphere, the TCC share not only similar occupations but similar education and lifestyles as well.

We can argue that the TCC across countries have more in common with each other than they have with their non-capitalist compatriots.²⁰ This goes back to Dirlik's argument that globalisation gives rise to not only 'clashes between civilisations' but also cultural divisions internal to nations or civilisations.²¹ With more members of the TCC moving to Mui Wo, such cultural divisions have also emerged. One of the more common discontents I hear from Cantonese-speaking-only local residents is that government officers take complaints from 'foreigners' more seriously; as a result, their voices are increasingly shaping how Mui Wo is like. In such a case, a local middle-aged resident who had been collecting and reselling metal scraps for a living used to put these materials beside the small path outside his house (in a good order, in my opinion). I have discussed in Chapter 1 that the dualism of the private and public is a modern concept; to many locals, the two are not distinct spheres. Also, this public exposure could draw the

¹⁹ Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class*, 4.

²⁰ Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class*, 12.

²¹ Dirlik, *Global Modernity*, 30.

attention of other residents – it was upon seeing these metal scraps beside the path that people knew someone was taking them in and could bring their discarded metals to this man. However, soon after a Caucasian couple moved to a nearby house, they lodged a complaint to the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) about the metal scraps being placed on the side of the path. Subsequently, FEHD officers ordered the man to move away the materials from the site on the grounds that it was a public area. Since the house of the man was not big enough to accommodate all the materials, it was unclear whether or not he would be able to continue to make his living out of this recycling activity. He was discontented and thought FEHD succumbed themselves to ‘foreigners’.

While it is true that front-line officers may adopt different attitudes towards residents of various origins (some would be more polite to English-speaking residents than to Chinese speakers), the observation of this man (that government departments take formal complaints from ‘foreigners’ more seriously than those from locals) would likely be due to the cultural affinity among members of the TCC. Due to similar educational backgrounds and socialisation, members of TCC – corporate executives, transnational functionaries, journalists – speak the same language as functionaries; this is a technical, rational and legal language. They know how to write a complaint letter properly, how to organise the arguments, and how to obtain desirable responses from the government. They are also familiar with the rules and procedures. It would be a mistake to reify globalisation, as much as it would be a mistake to reify the state. Both are social processes and involve sets of social relations. Rules and procedures are shaped by the national state apparatus as much as they are shaped by the transnational elites. We shall

see in Chapter 5 that in some cases, interactions between residents and frontline government agents ‘on the ground’ will further harden government intervention in local space. Conversely, in other cases, engagement by users can negotiate with the process of government intervention.

iv. Scenery please, but not the smell

I have discussed in Chapter 1 that after years of talk about how the place is ‘declining’ or even ‘dead’ due to its dwindling population, Mui Wo is today home to many middle-class professionals and white-collar workers and their families. They include Hong Kong Chinese and many non-Chinese speaking residents originally from Europe, the US, Australia and other parts of Asia. I have noted the factors attracting them to relocate to Mui Wo: its natural and green environment; its accessibility from Central, the CBD of Hong Kong, by as short as a 30-minute ferry ride; and its relative low housing prices comparing to the upmarket Discovery Bay, where many residents became fed up with the nightly fireworks in Disneyland.

I have also highlighted how the increasingly strong presence of the TCC is changing the housing landscape. Compared to a few years ago, now more newly built or renovated houses with ‘western-style’ layout and decorations such as large, open kitchens and spacious bathrooms have been offered up for sale or rental *en-bloc*. Sun Lung Wai, a small village in Mui Wo that used to have no more than 50 houses, saw more than 10 new, luxurious ‘western-style’ houses built for sale or rent over the last few years. The Environmental Protection Officer mentioned above also used Sun Lung Wai as an example to illustrate the need for a centralised sewerage system in anticipation of future needs: ‘When I first went there to inspect the site, there were

hardly any houses'. But when she visited again, a lot of new houses were built in a matter of months.

As discussed in Chapter 1, while we are seeing the redevelopment of the Central waterfront (or West Kowloon, for that matter) into high-class office, retail and hotel complexes, Mui Wo can be considered as part of the same gentrification process. This gentrification process is related to the development works that we are witnessing, although as we are going to see, the process is complicated and at times hampered by an increasingly marginalised local culture.

While more urban middle class are attracted to Mui Wo because of its natural environment, the greenery is also associated with all sorts of 'backwardness' by urban standards: mosquitoes, cow dung, night soil smells, lack of motor vehicles, floods and exposure to other adverse weather conditions. Many of these newly built or renovated houses have big glass windows that look onto the beautiful surroundings. At the same time, each of them has a number of air-conditioners dotting the exterior walls. While enjoying a nice landscape outside, one is seated inside an air-conditioned, glassed, western-style interior space, chasing away the inconveniences such as heat and humidity, smells and insects. In this way, we can understand gentrification as a 'dirt-avoidance' process: drive away the dirt and retain the purity, and one has an order that conforms to the idea of 'ideal living'.

v. Septic tank

Many urban dwellers, the transnational capitalist class included, have arrived to live in Mui Wo without any knowledge about the septic tank – that is, until problems arise.

A septic tank is a small-scale waste treatment system and is common in rural areas throughout the world. Its operating principles are simple: septic tanks separate solid waste from liquids. The solid waste is stored in the septic tank and treated by anaerobic bacteria. The liquids, on the other hand, are dispersed throughout the soil on the property by the leaching, a mechanism which is a part of the septic tank.²² For all its simplicity, the septic tank is a proven, efficient system for treating human waste for a small population. The Environmental Protection Officer and the Senior Engineer at the Drainage Services Department whom I interviewed would admit this point. The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has also a set of guidelines advising the proper use and maintenance of their septic tanks.

The major problems associated with the septic tank lie not in its design but its use and maintenance. To keep its efficiency, the septic tank has to be cleared of its solid waste when necessary. More importantly, the septic tank cannot be overloaded. The EPD suggests the following ways to avoid overloading the septic tank system and to save water: ‘Do not waste any water; use water sensibly. Do not flush your toilet unnecessarily. Take a brief shower instead of a bath. Use washing machine only when fully loaded.’ To avoid blockage, the EPD also suggests only a small amount of soft toilet paper should be deposited into the system. Not too much oil and chemicals should be used either.²³ In other words, the septic tank system requires a non-wasteful way of living – which in a way, promotes a more environment-friendly way of living. As such, I

²² <http://septictank.org> (accessed 26 April 2010).

²³ Environment Protection Department, *Guidance Notes on Discharges from Village Houses*, http://www.epd.gov.hk/epd/english/environmentinhk/water/guide_ref/guide_wpc_dv.html (accessed 27 April 2010).

find it not without irony that it was the EPD who initiated the abolishment of the septic tank in favour of a centralised system.

In 2009, at least two houses in the village where I am living repeatedly saw their septic tanks overflow. In the most dramatic case, one house had its septic tank overflow on Christmas Eve. The house contains three households, one on each level. At that time, the landlord, who resided on the top floor, was away on vacation with his wife and two children back in the UK, his native country. The family living on the ground floor, who is a French-Indonesian couple with their toddler son, was having a few stay-home guests from France. The middle floor is home to a single lady from New Zealand. The residents in this house preferred to put up with the situation for about 10 days, until the landlord returned from the UK to clear up the tank, instead of doing it themselves or hiring someone to do it.

In the previous year, when the house had another overflow of its septic tank, the landlord concerned invited his neighbour next door, who is an indigenous resident, to advise on the situation. I was there to act as their interpreter.

Englishman: *I don't understand. I have been here for four years. This used to be fine. But this year the septic tank often blocks. It's okay for me to clear once every year, but once every month...!*

Indigenous resident: *...the system cannot hold it any more... you know, ladies use too much toilet paper... (If) you flush every time you go to the toilet... a lot of water (going into the septic tank)... you shouldn't flush every single time...*

At this point, I translated the first point made by the indigenous resident, i.e. they may have used too much toilet paper.

Englishman: (shrugs) *They are Western ladies, how can you expect them to use less tissue paper?*

In the end, I did not translate the second point made by the indigenous resident, i.e. one does not have to flush the toilet every time. I asked myself why. At that split second, at least three thoughts came to my mind. First, from a very young age I had been trained to flush the toilet every time after use. Not to do it is dirt to me – one would not be acting properly. It seemed difficult for me to tell the Englishman it was not necessary to do so after all. Second, ignorant of how a septic tank worked at that time, I was not sure whether or not the indigenous resident was right. Later, I realised the French-Indonesian couple operated three loads of machine washing every day which might have been the cause behind the overflow of their septic tank. In other words, it is the modern hygienic practice that renders the septic tank malfunctioning.

Third, from the reactions of the Englishman to the first point raised, I knew he would not consider changing their own, ‘western’ lifestyle, even though such change is the most straightforward and efficient solution. Somehow I was afraid that had I told him not to flush the toilet after use, he would say, ‘but we are Westerners, how can you expect us not to always flush?’

Here, ‘Orientalism’ works at two levels. As discussed earlier, in the era of globalisation, stereotyping internal to the boundaries of race, civilisation and nation is at least as important as that between them. With hygiene as a marker of modernity, Orientalism exists both among Chinese as well as among foreigners. In the above case of septic tank overflow, on the one hand, I was aware of a stereotyped view of ‘us’ – the indigenous resident and me as ‘Chinese’ – by a Westerner. We are the ‘other’ to the

Englishman, who is also acutely aware of this, since he immediately attributed the (abundant) use of hygienic products to cultural differences. In this particular instance, ‘we’ and the Englishman are not in equal power relations – he took up a culturally superior position.

On the other hand, the indigenous resident is also the ‘other’ to me. In doubting his advice against flushing the toilet every time after use, I was thinking if this was related to *his* hygiene habits as an indigenous resident. I was aware of the differences between us. As an urbanite deep down, I am also a product of the ‘internal’ cultural divisions and that I am also having a stereotyped view of the indigenous resident.

While the septic tank is the local order as represented by the indigenous resident’s familiarity and ease when dealing with it, when encountering the global and urban orders and their associated Orientalist stereotypes, unequal power relations render the septic tank as ‘dirt’.

The Englishman was relieved to learn that the government was to connect the village to the centralised sewerage system. He, who owns a few properties in Mui Wo and a business in the Philippines, together with other members of the TCC, is giving additional weight to the ideology of development. As an absentee landlord frequently away from Mui Wo and Hong Kong, he is to make money out of this property as owner, instead of occupying it as user, whereas the septic tank requires active, everyday engagement of the user. Overflows of the septic tank are giving him a headache, and he was more than happy to see the dirty work be done by a third party. In an indirect way, the TCC is helping to drive away ‘dirt’ in Mui Wo and Hong Kong at large and establish

an order in accordance with global modernity – ‘western-style’ villas instead of local village houses, centralised sewerage instead of septic tanks.

The fact that the centralised sewerage system is going to be built throughout Mui Wo replacing the septic tank, reflects that the former is the predominant order of the time. As noted above, in order not to overload the septic tank, one should use less water – not to use the washing machine frequently, not to take long showers, etc. Unfortunately, Hong Kong is notorious in water wastage and tops the list of water usage in the world: on average each person consumed 220 litres of water per day in 2008, much higher than the world average of 170 litres.²⁴ With this excessive use of water, it is not surprising that a large sewerage system is needed to treat all the waste water.

The workings of the septic tank do not fit the *Weisheng* modernity either. The fewer the number of residents who understand and support the workings behind the septic tank – thus leading a more ‘restrained’ way of life, the more powerful the discourse surrounding the centralised sewerage system becomes. The septic tank system is ‘out of place’ not because it is unhygienic, but because it does not conform to the idea of ‘modern’ living by global and urban standards.

In the intersecting of the rural with the urban and global order, due to unequal power relations, the rural is often represented as the ‘dirt’ against the dominant system(s). However, there exist instances when the rural order is the dominant system, and elements from outside this system are represented as danger and subsequently rejected. In our study of the centralised sewerage system in Mui Wo, one of the villages, Tai Tei Tong, has rejected the extension of the sewerage pipes into the village.

²⁴ *Wen Wei Po*, 5 December 2009.

In contrast to most other major villages in Mui Wo, Tai Tei Tong is composed mainly of local Chinese residents, many of whom are also indigenous residents. It was said that a few elderly residents fell ill ever since the machinery connected to the building of the sewer has arrived at the entrance of the village. Many residents believed the machinery has spoiled the Feng Shui there. Protest banners were mounted in the village to ask the sewerage works to stop, accusing such works to cause ‘unsettling effects for the young and the old alike’ (老少不安). The village then asked the government to allocate a sum in the order of HK\$500,000 – 600,000 to settle the ‘Dun Fu’ (墩符) as a pre-condition for the works to proceed, but the amount has exceeded the ceiling amount of HK\$20,000 allowed by the government for Fengshui-related arrangements. As a result, the works at Tai Tei Tong stopped, and the village will not be connected to the central sewerage facilities and will continue to use the septic tanks. In the eyes of government officers, residents’ concerns were just ‘superstition’.

To understand this, instead of conceiving globalisation as a hegemonic, unifying force, it is important to look at the fragmentations. Economically and socially, there are deep inequalities between the high-income professional class and low-wage workers. Culturally, as Dirlik has noted, globalisation unifies the globe but also divides it in new ways, contrary to the belief that globalisation universalises norms and practices of advanced capitalist society. His concept of ‘global modernity’ recognises fragmentation and contradiction as equally fundamental tendencies as a result of globalisation and of past legacies.²⁵

²⁵ Dirlik, *Global Modernity*.

The globalisation of modernity needs to be comprehended not just in the trivial sense of an originary modernity reaching out and touching all, even those who are left out of its benefits, as in the ideological deployments of globalisation but, more important, as a proliferation of claims on modernity. So-called traditions no longer imply a contrast with modernity, as they did in modernisation discourse. Nor are they the domain of backward-looking conservatism... They point not to the past but, taking a detour through the past, to an alternative future.²⁶

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the modern character is someone who is anxious about difference and tries to homogenise taste, lifestyle and her/his environment in order to avoid the anxiety. This anxiety, coupled with the globalisation of modernity and consumer culture, makes the discourses of modernisation and consumerism extremely powerful. Dirlik's discussions here remind us that the so-called traditions are neither backward nor inferior. They are just different. By taking a detour through the past and at the same time pointing to an alternative future, these traditions show that historical progression is not 'linear' as defined by a universalistic time chain. Ban Wang criticises the forward imaginary of modern history as something based on such a universalistic time chain, which is abstract and far from universal. This is a time chain used by Western scholars to gauge different nations and to distinguish distinct historical and geographical traditions. In the guise of universality, this abstract time chain often serves as a tool to dominate, suppress and colonise people and social groups who cannot keep pace with it.²⁷

²⁶ Dirlik, *Global Modernity*, 90.

²⁷ Ban Wang, *History and Memory: In the Shadow of Globalization* (歷史與記憶：全球現代性的質疑) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2004), 177-178.

Without the necessity of buying into the Fengshui claims, the basic argument is that every segment of society has its worldview and claims to difference within the global order. These claims, which are based on rural traditions, when intersecting with the urban and global order, are far from ‘backward looking’ following the argument by Dirlik and Wang as mentioned above. Instead, they are just different, and can be progressive – in our case, they have kept a place of ‘dirt’. Looking at it in a slightly different way, due to the self-governing tradition in small villages, they are able to form a self-contained entity in the matter of sewage and resist the central system as dirt.

vi. Waste as creative

As Douglas has pointed out, dirt, like the weeds and lawn cuttings that have been turned into compost, can be enriching to our experience as well as to the soil. Dirt, normally destructive, can sometimes become creative.²⁸ Any system, social organisation included, must thus in some way incorporate dirt and regenerate itself, in order to be viable.

To Gay Hawkins, modern environmental campaigns tend to instil a sense of despair and guilt towards waste. In her view, while this attitude can mobilise people towards changing their behaviour, it can also immobilise them due to resentment. In her work discussing the ethics of waste, instead of culpabilising waste as environmentally destructive, Hawkins proposes to look at waste more creatively. She argues that it is through our bodily practices and experiences that we relate ourselves to waste. Think about all the environmental awareness campaigns that urge us to recycle our waste, for instance. It is our body which sorts rubbish into different categories based on its material: plastic, glass, metal, paper, etc. It is also our body which transports these materials and

²⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 159-163.

put them into the recycling bin. In the demand to handle empty bottles or newspapers differently, our relations with these formerly useless things have changed. They have become residual resource and we have become 'environmental aware'. The ritual of rinsing and sorting has produced a new network of obligations and identities. New waste habits are formed. Since habits have a materialising power on persons, when they break down, new sensations and perceptions are precipitated. This movement of the sense and perception signals the terrain of micropolitics. This is where new techniques and capacities could emerge that change how we relate to ourselves and waste.²⁹

In a way that would remind us of Douglas's argument that the system can be renewed by dirt, Hawkins writes that without a category of rubbish, it is impossible to generate new and unexpected structures of value. Without it, neither can value change or move. Instead of possessing a set of intrinsic properties of things, value is a product of social processes. Things decay and wear out, but it does not mean that they automatically lose value. The key to value and its transformation is how the materiality of things is apprehended and used.³⁰

In other words, it is our relations with things that matter. Waste is abandoned things. There are practices of valuing and classification that make them useless.³¹ However, through our handling of waste through recycling or re-using it, instead of sending it straight to the landfill or incinerator, new values can be generated. This is what makes Hawkins's argument interesting to the study here, since it means the body in everyday life can be implicated in transforming values in a creative way. What counts is

²⁹ Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste – How we relate to rubbish* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 9-15.

³⁰ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 78.

³¹ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 13.

how we, as subjects, relate ourselves to these abandoned things. Instead of instilling a sense of moral guilt and despair in the face of environmental problems, this viewpoint empowers individuals – we have an agency against the seemingly disastrous situation, and there is much we can do.

The above view is easily criticised as tokenism, meaning that it is just individuals feeling good about themselves but that their act is so minor and trivial that it does not help the big picture. While I agree there are indeed benevolent acts that are misplaced in their emphasis, it is more due to how we relate ourselves to the big picture, than to acts being too small in themselves. Following the above argument by Hawkins, if there is no such thing as an intrinsic value of things, if it is our interactions with waste that have the potential to create and transform value, then none of our acts can be quite considered as too minor, as changes and transformations in values that result are totally unexpected; in other words, major and fundamental changes can be attained.

Hawkins argues that it is simplistic for environmental education campaigns to ask people to think twice before they dispose of their things, as it overlooks how we can be blind to our everyday objects. This simplicity also fails to see how we can transform our material habitus. In a way that again reminds us of Douglas's concept of dirt as a matter of out of place, Hawkins argues that disposal is a kind of purification ritual that restores order for us. There is a function as well as pleasure in this act. Categorising things as rubbish not only helps us eliminate things from our lives, but it also helps us experience the 'fantasy' of self-sovereignty. As our daily habit, disposal hinges on a kind of blindness that helps us not to see or acknowledge the things that we would like to get rid of. Throwing things away also means we are subordinating material objects to our action

as humans. In this process, we are constructing a world in which we think we have dominion.³²

Since we can turn blind to what we are throwing away, for rubbish to be framed differently it needs first of all to be noticed and conspicuous. The phenomenological reality of rubbish has to be acknowledged before other possibilities and potentials emerge, and before other sets of value and use are activated. Discarded objects are not merely the passive and redundant context for human lives, but they should be recognised as mobile, vital matter open to reconstitution. Hawkins suggests one way might be to consider waste as things, which are most noticeable when they are in transition.³³

Again, this liminal state resonates with Douglas's concept about danger and dirt. Rubbish is not dangerous when it is completely rotten and disintegrated, i.e. when all identity is gone. The stage at which rubbish is dangerous is when it is considered as out of place and when some identity still clings to it. Purity is the enemy of change. In other words, without pollution, transformation and renewal are also impossible.³⁴

Being different from the material object world and its primary circuits of exchange, things are what is left after objectification breaks down: they are what we suddenly notice when an object seems to drop out of all the systems that give it meaning and value: the worn sofa sitting on the pavement for days awaiting the garbage pickup captures our attention as a thing. It is in a liminal stage: not quite waste yet and definitely out of place, sitting there quietly negotiating its time. Its movement from the

³² Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 80.

³³ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 80.

³⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 160-162.

living room to the street, from useful to discarded, defamiliarises it, putting us into a different relationship with it.³⁵

According to this view, rubbish is not rubbish, but a literal trace that is available for transformation. It is part of the network of tracks that register movement and tell of events. It is potentiality, able to transform people. At the same time, people can transform it.³⁶

With the above theoretical discussions in mind – how waste can be transformed to create new values, I now turn my attention to the local scene of Kau Tsuen, one of the villages in Mui Wo. It was some time in the year 2010. One TCC family composed of an English executive working at a multinational bank, his Japanese wife and two sons, were about to move house. One or two months prior to the move, their Filipino domestic helper started to dispose of their ‘rubbish’. From their standalone house to the refuse collection point of the village is a 200-metre walk, passing a few neighbouring houses.

Every time the helper dragged the giant garbage bags along the path, sometimes exposing the contents inside, it was like a parade, inciting the curiosity of neighbours. Yun, the independent artist whom I have mentioned in Chapter 1 and a former resident of Kau Tsuen, writes in her blog that the helper could not bear to see so many things being thrown away. She thinks this is especially true since ‘most of the things were handled by his two hands’. Many were brand new items with their original packing kept unopened. Some were duplicates of the same item. Yun writes that she would also feel bad if she was the helper. Gradually, on this path along which the helper delivered the unwanted things by the family, from their house to the garbage bins, the relationship

³⁵ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 80.

³⁶ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 89.

between the helper and Yun, and that between the villagers and ‘rubbish’ experienced subtle transformation.

Naturally, we built up some kind of understanding between us. Every time he dragged the ‘rubbish’ past our house, he would automatically open the bag, and we would automatically rummage through the contents inside, taking away things we find useful. Gradually, other neighbours as ‘poor’ as us joined our rank of rummaging through the ‘rubbish’.³⁷

Obviously, we can criticise the above TCC family as wasteful. The landfills in Hong Kong are quickly being filled up, but much that is found in our rubbish bin should not be there in the first place. At the time of writing, a new incinerator is being proposed to be built on a man-made island in Shek Kau Chau, just off the southern coast of Lantau Island. The social campaign organised in South Lantau in 2012 against the building of this incinerator was mainly driven by members of the TCC, many of whom own properties or live in houses in Cheung Sha and Pui O, which would be most affected by the proposed incinerator. A restaurant owner in South Lantau who has mainly a clientele of Western origin, refused to support the campaign when asked to do so, even though she knew it is likely that her business will be affected by the sight of an incinerator just off the coast of South Lantau. She said many of those who oppose to the building of the incinerator lead a wasteful way of living – turning on the air-conditioner at home while wearing a thick cardigan, or own more than one car between family members. ‘Talking about environmental protection, start with yourself’, she told me. To oppose to the building of the incinerator while continuing to throw away waste in a large amount in

³⁷ All Yun’s Photos, ‘3rd February: The Only Advantage to be the Neighbour of the Superrrrrrich’ (二月初三【與富富富富富有的人做鄰居唯一的好處】), <http://wp.me/pPzCp-4h> (accessed 16 April 2012).

the rubbish bin, like what the family of four mentioned above has done, simply leads us to nowhere.

While I agree the building of more incinerators will engender pollution, any opposition can only find its ethical ground if the individual, as a subject, does not contribute to a disproportionate increase in municipal waste. More positively, the corporeal action of handling waste *locally* – instead of a centralised incinerator treating territory-wide waste – is a more powerful response to the ‘landfill crisis’ we are facing in Hong Kong. To Hawkins, recycling is an example of a minor change in habits around waste. Its implementation involves a different bodily disposition and performance, a different way of doing things with old paper and empty containers.³⁸

Some sceptics dismiss changes in personal practices as tokenism but Hawkins thinks such dismissal perpetuates the idea that politics is restricted to ‘macroassemblages’ like the state or capitalism, and that real social transformation is possible only via wholesale revolutionary change. In her view, this approach does not just oppose the personal to the political, making it difficult to see the multiplicity of relations between these spheres. It can also lapse into what she calls ‘moralistic blueprints’ for changes in consciousness. These moral imperatives take no account of how bodies and feelings are implicated in thinking, which is often below the threshold of conscious decision making. It is wrong to assume that agency comes before actions, that the thinking self makes the body change its habits.³⁹

In the view of Hawkins, campaigns urging us to ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ have not just implicated our everyday household practices, they have also implicated our bodies,

³⁸ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 114-115.

³⁹ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 7; 115.

which in turn involve our own subjectivity. In problematizing what we should do with our waste, these campaigns have also subjected *who* we are and *how* we should be in the world to scrutiny. She notes that it is impossible to change waste practices without implicating the self in a process of reflexivity, without asking people to implicitly or explicitly think about the way they live. As a result, historical specificity of moral codes and ideals is linked with an embodied sensibility, with repeated practices and habits that shape how our bodies feel and the forms of reason that make these actions and affects meaningful.⁴⁰

Following Hawkins's argument, styles of waste disposal are then also styles of self. In managing waste we constitute an ethos and a sensibility. Our waste habits – all those repeated routines – leave their traces on our bodies and our environment.⁴¹ Rather than a minor change in habits that confers virtue on the dutiful recycler, waste practices based on corporeal generosity would involve a body that was open to the difference of waste and the nonhuman world; a body that was aware of how its ways of living depended on the gift of others. It would mean a body that was not indifferent to waste's alterity but was aware, instead, of the intersubjective links that always connect us to what we discard.⁴²

With this intersubjective link between humans and things in mind, coupled with Hawkins's suggestion to view rubbish as a literal trace of transformation that we discussed earlier, here I want to focus on how waste can tell a story and be transformed into something creative.

⁴⁰ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 5.

⁴¹ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 15.

⁴² Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 115.

I have discussed in Chapter 1 that Yun came to realise the potential of unwanted materials when she was still a student at the Academy for Performing Arts. She found the ‘standard’ arts practice of discarding all the installations after a performance too wasteful, and this is why she had developed a habit of looking for unwanted but useful objects in rubbish points. As we are going to see, this awareness of hers was going to enable her to make an installation that is at once eye-catching, creative, functional and ironic.

Among the things that Yun was able to recuperate from the garbage of the abovementioned family of four was a brand new, glittering white toilet seat. She took it home and put it away in her storeroom, having at first no idea what to do with it, except that it would be a shame if it was thrown away. I imagine it was somehow forgotten in a corner. After some time, she writes, she was tidying up the storeroom when she rediscovered this toilet seat.

Looking at it, an idea suddenly pops up in my mind...

...This is the best place to accommodate it.⁴³

⁴³ All Yun’s Photos, ‘29th July: Treasures Up and Down’ (七月廿九【珍藏上下】), <http://wp.me/pPzCp-t1> (accessed 16 April 2012).



Photo Courtesy: Au Hoi-Yan.

Yun came up with the idea of putting the toilet seat under the papaya tree planted in the middle of the village garden, the sight of which is open to virtually any person coming into and going out of the village. It is obviously out of place. As one neighbour noted, she did not think it was a good idea to put a toilet seat in the garden. When I asked why, she could not express how she felt in words. Without doubt, the scene looked disturbing to her. The toilet seat was not dirt in the bathroom, nor was it dirt in the garbage bag. But it became ‘dangerous’ in the sense that it transgresses acceptable boundaries from the moment Yun rummaged in the helper’s garbage bag, more so when it was put in the garden, under a papaya tree.

However, as noted above, without dirt, change and transformation are impossible. Here, toilet seat is no longer the toilet seat that we have known all along. While it was sitting in the garden, it was defamiliarised, obliging us to think about its new meaning, and our relationship with it. On the most superficial level, especially for those who knew

where the toilet seat came from, it served to remind people of the absurdity of wastefulness. Beyond this, one would also gradually enter a new relationship with it as time went by. I bet no one would consider sitting on it to defecate, as one would do in a bathroom. But when you know what is found underneath the seat, its meaning is being thrown into disorder again.

Beneath it, there is also gold hidden preciously for a long time... cow dung.⁴⁴

Apart from being creative by putting the toilet seat in a place where it does not usually belong, and ironic by mocking the prodigality of the bourgeoisie, this installation is at the same time functional, as it is used as part of the device (together with the wild taro leaves) to cover up the sight and smell of a heap of cow dung.

Certainly, cattle and buffaloes would never sit on a toilet seat to defecate, as humans would. But here, when there was cow dung beneath the toilet seat, suddenly the ontological separation between humans and other animals became ambiguous. Excreta are excreta, human or otherwise. Likewise, night soil and manure are fertilisers, nourishing plants, including the papaya tree. Instead of a paradigm of 'us' versus 'nature' (which many environmental campaigns would imply, by saying, for instance, human actions are doing much harm *onto* the environment), these reflections prompted by the toilet seat under a papaya tree put humans on a par with other organisms and with nature. The implication is that, as with other animals, we are part of nature. We have our responsibility towards nature, but producing and disposing of waste is also part of our nature. Only by recognising this fundamental fact can we be free from a sense of guilt and fear which the environmental discourse would often imply, and to look at waste in a more positive and creative way.

⁴⁴All Yun's Photos, '29th July: Treasures Up and Down'.

This sense of guilt and fear has its unintended consequences. Hawkins has pointed out images and stories about the horrifying presence of waste infuse loathing in us, so much so its vital place in the care of the self and everyday life is often overlooked. This end of the world picture also easily triggers resentment in us – if there is nothing we can really do, why bother?⁴⁵ This view alone makes it worthwhile to look at waste differently.

Also, we have seen in the above that without dirt, changes and transformation are impossible. When things become defamiliarised, we no longer take them for granted and start to ask questions. Itself a product of modern life, the defamiliarised, glittering toilet seat called into question modern living by sitting on top of a pool of cow dung. Placed conspicuously in the middle of an open garden, the toilet seat also served as a marker, constantly reminding us of our own shit, which, according to modern hygienic discourse, is to be kept domestic, hidden from the public's sight and olfactory sense.

Public secret is that which is generally known but cannot be spoken.⁴⁶ I can still remember the horror and embarrassment when the cover of the septic tank of the abovementioned Englishman's house was open: a piece of fat shit was floating there, having its day. None of us – the indigenous resident, the Englishman, or I – said a word, but all of us knew we were all staring at the excreta. The scene was disturbing. We all shit, but it is supposed to be kept private. Our excrement is made disappeared the moment we flush our toilet, and we shall never see it again. However, with the septic tank, it just stays there, floating outside the house. The excrement may have left the house (domestic), but it remains one's responsibility. If it functions well, we will be able

⁴⁵ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 12-13.

⁴⁶ Gay Hawkins, 'Down the Drain: Shit and the Politics of Disturbance', in *Culture and Waste*, ed. Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 41.

not to see it. But when it malfunctions (for instance, overloading the septic tank to which one is responsible), our excrement comes back to haunt us (as the image and odour of that fat shit still haunt me today). True, human excrement is used by some farmers as fertiliser but the precondition is that it be handled and covered properly. Exposed excrement without any proper precaution can spread diseases. In this sense, the body discipline imposed by the septic tank is to know that everything has its limits: cleaner (by using more water) is not necessarily more hygienic; it can even become a hygienic nightmare (when the septic tank overflows).

Moreover, some residents opposed to the sewerage system because they were fed up with the endless works that had been going on. One resident said that before ‘experiencing the pain’ brought about by the large-scale drainage works that had been going on for years, originally he did not oppose to the sewerage works, but after witnessing the works that have been going on for such a long time and putting up with all the dust and nuisances, he decided to ‘steadfastly guard’ his septic tank at home. The change in attitude of this resident constitutes a self-reflection: while the works have had a great impact on his daily life, he also came to see that his daily life and practices would have a direct bearing on the works – the government builds the sewerage system because modern lifestyle makes the septic tank ‘obsolete’. Also, as noted above, the excessive amount of water that Hong Kong people use every day is one major reason why a central sewer with a large capacity is needed. In other words, our everyday waste practices are directly related to the obsolescence of the septic tank and the necessity of a sewerage system.

The question of responsibility, and the concept of use and property rights are also involved here. It has almost become a cliché to say that responsibilities come together with rights, but it is true that nowadays we emphasise much about rights, above all property rights, but not enough about responsibilities. I think the predominance of property rights is related to the lack of emphasis on responsibilities. In the case of space, responsibilities involve the duty to take care of things and the environment, and thus the body is involved; whereas property rights are abstract, meaning the property owner possesses the title to something but s/he may not have a concrete relation with the object in question. One example is the absentee landlord, whereby the landlord owns the property rights but is not involved in the daily matters of the house. In contrast, user rights are concrete, involving one's own body in space. When the body is involved, it is evident for the user that it is in her/his own interest to take care of space, even if it does not fall under the person's own property rights. As noted in Chapter 2, traditionally the rights to leased land in the New Territories had been divided into two parts: first, the right to farm the land, which was granted in perpetuity to the tenant; and second, the right to collect rent on the land, which was reserved by the landlord. Under this system, user rights had precedence over property rights. As long as the tenant paid his rent, he had a perpetual right to cultivate the land, which did not cease even with his death. This was so because tenant farmers, who cultivate the land using their body, took direct responsibility over the care of the land.

This precedence of user rights over property rights was a far cry from what we are having in modern, capitalist society – today, property rights take priority over user rights. However, as mentioned, responsibilities come with rights at the same time. Property

owners having the ultimate rights also mean that they are supposed to assume most, if not all of the responsibilities over the property. This may lead to users shunning off their own. This was why in the aforementioned case, the tenants preferred to put up with an overflowing septic tank for 10 days and wait for the landlord to fix the problem, although as users, they were responsible for the problem in the first place. In this particular case, the male occupant did not want to understand why the septic tank of the house overflowed so frequently, by saying it was his wife who took care of the kitchen and all the domestic affairs. Meanwhile, his wife referred all decisions to her husband when facing questions from the 'outside'. This private-public dualism with the man taking care of 'public affairs' and the woman taking care of 'domestic affairs', ends up with neither of them taking care of the septic tank, which cannot be understood in the frame of private-public dualism; instead, it is a mix of public and private. When neighbours tried to approach this family for problems relating to grey water flowing from their house, they also took up the attitude of 'Please talk to my landlord'. They did not seem to accept that they have their own responsibility as users. This family moved to Mui Wo in search for a greener lifestyle, because they could not support the noise in urban Hong Kong. But they had also moved the modern and the urban with them.

At the time of writing, the septic tank of the block where I am living overflowed, causing shit water to flow into my unit, which is located on the ground floor. Just before this happened, there had been heavy rain for about a week. According to the plumber, the probable cause was rainwater being clogged up in the septic tank. With the help of a neighbour, water was pumped out from the tank, until water and excrement fell to a low level again. When I gave some money to this neighbour to compensate for his equipment

and labour work, he also thought it was the responsibility of my landlord and suggested me to claim the money back from him. In the end, I did not follow his advice, but split the cost between the neighbour living upstairs and myself instead. My rationale is: the landlord, who occupied the uppermost unit of the three-storey house at that time, was seldom here. This means it was occupants on the other two floors who mainly load shit water and grey water into the septic tank. When it overflows, I believe that we, as users, should take up our part of the responsibility.

With rapid urbanisation and a rising population, the septic tank, itself a modern invention, cannot cope with the pace of a global metropolis and is being driven away. With the septic tank, it only suffices to lift its cover to find out what is still there, and what has been transformed. With the centralised sewerage system, waste is eliminated rather than taken care of. We never see our own excrement again, nor do we know what happens to it from the moment we flush.

Modern society is so obsessed with cleanliness that rubbish and excrement are to be got rid of in the fastest way possible. Sewers and incinerators are in line with this purpose – not only is waste eliminated, it is eliminated quickly, conveniently, and efficiently. Waste, together with its smell, disappears in a split second – from the moment we dispose of rubbish in the bin or flush the toilet. Once waste leaves our household (private), it is no longer our responsibility to manage it and we leave it in the hands of the state (public). This not only invites the intervention of the state which is also a form of power, but we also know so little about the rubbish that we produce. It is transported away by municipal cleaners in large, black garbage bags, while excrement is drained down the pipes to the central treatment plant.

Paradoxically, when waste is put out of sight and out of reach so quickly and efficiently, and when we only pay someone else (in effect the state) to clean up after us, we never truly realise the potentiality, or horror for that matter, of rubbish. We remain ignorant and alienated in the matter of waste which, on the one hand, leads to an overflowing rubbish bin and dumping site and, on the other, misses out the metamorphosis of waste which, according to Hawkins, can be an enchantment.⁴⁷ Hawkins is using Jane Bennett's notion of enchantment. Bennett argues that the experience of enchantment is often linked to material metamorphoses, which are capable of revealing the instability of ontology. Enchantment is much more than a spectatorial delight; it is a moment of potential ethical transformation. 'My wager is that if you engage certain crossings under propitious conditions, you might find that their dynamism revivifies your wonder at life, their morphings inform your reflections upon freedom, their charm energizes your social conscience, and their flexibility stretches your moral sense of the possible.'⁴⁸

Hawkins notes that composting campaigns, in contrast to other environmental education initiatives that ride on the sense of guilt, often presume a pleasure and generosity in waste. In Brisbane, Australia, for instance, there was an 'Enjoy Your Garbage' campaign run by the City Council. There are slogans like 'What you don't eat your garden will'.

The play here is on sameness, on the similarities between self and garden, on exchanges that connect. Composting is framed as a gift; in cultivating a sensibility

⁴⁷ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 90.

⁴⁸ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 90; Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 32.

for it we are cultivating a waste ethos that proceeds from generosity rather than guilt.⁴⁹

In Kau Tsuen with about twenty houses, a few households practised composting in their own garden or rooftop. In October 2008, they issued a newsletter entitled *Village Style* to share their experiences and to promote the practice among neighbours. Titles of the articles include: ‘Old Village, New Soil’ (the Chinese name of ‘Kau Tsuen 舊村’ literally means ‘old village’ in English), ‘Keep Us Fertile’, and ‘101 Ways to Have Fun on Rooftop’. These are not promotional strategies to convey a positive message about composting. Rather, they are first-hand experiences by residents who, through their own embodied practice, feel the fun in composting and the gratitude in obtaining new and fertile soil. For instance, a retired engineer made a composter bin out of the material he found washed up on the local beaches - he took a 45 gallon blue barrel and cut two 100 mm holes in each end. Every day he revolved the composter to mix up the contents inside and to allow air to penetrate the potential compost. He also collected and introduced cow dung collected from wherever he found it. Towards the end of the article, he exclaims: ‘What exciting news for those who wish to live more independently from the mainstream system and closer to nature!’⁵⁰

In the newsletter, resident Yuen Fun wrote:

The various ‘challenges’ during the collection of kitchen residues, such as the foul smell or breeding of worms are not difficult to overcome technically. Instead, they can open up our perspectives on life: kitchen scraps, of which the only thing we wanted was to get rid of it as soon as possible, mixed with cow dung which was

⁴⁹ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 39.

⁵⁰ Paul Dodds, ‘101 Ways to Have Fun on Rooftop’, *Village Style*, October 2008, 6.

much discriminated against [and] a small amount of soil and a lot of dry leaves, will transform [themselves] into buckets of ‘black gold’ and lots of fat worms after weathering a period a storms and sunshine. Money simply cannot buy this kind of satisfaction and joy which can indeed be readily obtained without spending a penny.⁵¹

As can be seen from the above writings, joy, satisfaction and excitement are emphasised in the process of collecting kitchen residues and transforming them into fertile soil. These sentiments cannot be commodified, and yet they are what make life valuable. Also, such ‘unwanted materials’ as kitchen scraps, cow dung and fallen leaves in modern society are being converted into ‘black gold’. This is a value creating process, with value not being measured against exchangeability but against use.

Moreover, there is an awareness to reduce solid waste transported to the landfill through the act of collecting kitchen residue. In the same newsletter, another resident Tony Henderson writes: ‘[f]or our village effort [in composting], it is likely better to have a lower expectation and maybe even a different aim than having compost. [It is to have] a means of disposing of kitchen scraps instead of sending them from Mui Wo Kau Tsuen all the way to Tsing Yi Island landfill. If we also get some compost for potting plants, it’s a bonus.’⁵²

Besides compost, traditionally night soil and manure are made good use of in agrarian societies. Some farmers and gardeners in Mui Wo still use this method to fertilise their fields. Mok Kau-moon was no exception. Compared to the dry toilet of the late Mok, the septic tank is already very modern. Mok literally lived with his excrement

⁵¹ Yuen Fun, ‘Keep Us Fertile’, *Village Style*, 4.

⁵² ‘Old Village, New Soil’, *Village Style*, 1.

carefully inside his house in the village Ha Tseun Long. His toilet was a space with two large bricks on which one can squat. There were a few heaps of scraps used to cover the excrement and smell. It was simple but effective. I visited his toilet once although I did not use it. If not for the toilet paper found on the ground, I would not have guessed it was where Mok relieved himself.

I visited the toilet of another house in Lung Mei Tsuen, a remote village with only a few houses, which is not connected to a septic tank either. The toilet is a standalone hut built adjacent to the main house. While there is a toilet bowl inside the hut, it opens out to a pit underneath, into which the excrement would drop. When the pit is full, it has to be cleared up. In a video production *The first bucket of gold of Yun and Fun*,⁵³ the two occupants recorded their experience of clearing up the pit by their own hands. The video shows the two collecting shit water from the pit using a bucket, transporting one after another, only to empty the content into the fields beside the toilet as fertiliser. Having moved to this house for a few months, it was the first time they did this task, and the two had different reactions to it. Fun felt nausea at first but things became better as the smell died down gradually. Yun did not feel so repugnant to the job, but kept wondering if their shit looked especially disgusting compared to others'. The first time I saw this video, I found that I also was holding my breath unconsciously. As the two were working using their body and limbs, they discussed about this experience. Yun said she finally embodied the experience of farmers applying 'big fertiliser' in the local parlance, or night soil. Fun said it was fine to clear up one's own shit, although the pit also contained the excrement of the landlord, his workers and relatives.

⁵³ *The first bucket of gold of Yun and Fun* (茵勳的第一桶金), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fhaxW7NxOs> (accessed 28 April 2012).

They ended up emptying around 35 buckets each in half an hour. Fun concluded the experience in this way:

Soil and mountain water are so great that our smelly faeces are being transformed back to nutrients.

To be able to handle one's own faeces and urine, one feels autonomous and 'self-sufficient'.⁵⁴

We may think excrement is the nastiest thing on earth to handle with our hands. But after handling it for the second, third time, you will gradually find that it is not really that nasty, especially if we are taking care of our own shit. And if we can take care of our own shit, is there much else we cannot do to preserve ourselves? Anxiety in modern society is often related to risks, or the wish to manage risks. From Douglas, we know that this anxiety is not new: primitive societies have their own way of managing danger. She also told us dirt can be enriching.⁵⁵ From this short video, we learn that not only is dirt enriching to the soil, but it is also enriching to us as human subjects.

How about manure? Within the urban order, the only way to deal with the dirt of dung is to eliminate it. When Lam Tai-Fai, a member of the Legislative Council, visited Tong Fuk Correctional Institution in his capacity as Justice of Peace (JP) in early 2012, he nearly stepped on a heap of cow dung when he got off the helicopter. The helipad was full of the animal's excrement and Lam concluded Lantau was 'plagued by feral cattle'. He urged officers from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department

⁵⁴ Seeknopoer, *A Road of Shit*, (屎路一條), <http://wp.me/p24TmB-hY> (accessed 25 April 2012).

⁵⁵ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

(AFCD) to ‘solve the problem’.⁵⁶ To this JP, cow dung is merely nuisance, spoiling the path.

Likewise, on 2 May 2012, two Mui Wo residents wrote to *South China Morning Post*, a local English-language daily, to complain about ‘cow mess’ in the local playground. ‘The children’s playground in Mui Wo, Lantau, was yet again turned into a cow poop minefield, after a feral cow herd spent the night here. It was also accompanied by the strong smell of urine’, wrote Thomas Walther. He suggested to have the playground fenced off to prevent the cattle from entering it. Another resident, Jason Ali, wrote that cow dung posed a health hazard to the health of children, their parents and guardians. He went so far as to suggest the confinement of the cattle to securely fenced fields; if not, they should be rounded up and put down. Subsequently, towards mid May, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the government department responsible for the management of recreational facilities, surrounded the playground with a series of mills barriers to keep the cattle off.

To Messrs Ali, Walther and Lam, cow dung and urine are danger and hence they should be excluded from the system. I have mentioned the hazard posed by excrement of humans, or dogs for that matter, who are carnivores. In contrast, cows and buffalos are herbivores, and the exposure of their excrement in the open air is not harmful. In a rural setting, farmers and gardeners would welcome buffalo’s and cattle’s dung that sits on the village path. Ironically, it is possible for them to collect the manure, precisely because waste-collection in certain parts of Mui Wo is not as streamlined and efficient as the metropolitan area. Sometimes the animal excrement can be left there for one day

⁵⁶ ‘Lam Tai-fai Blames Cattle for Nearly Stepping on Cow Dung’ (林大輝幾乎踩屎怪牛牛), *Ming Pao Daily News*, 9 January 2012.

or two because municipal workers do not reach out to these areas, at least not every single day. When it is picked up by gardeners, it will be transformed from waste to fertiliser, nourishing the soil and nurturing new life. In other words, the slow pace of life and ‘inefficient’ government services make it possible for the transformation of value – from being waste to something positive, productive and creative.

Instead of having the government cleaners collecting dung in giant plastic garbage bags and transporting them all the way to the landfill in town, through our body action, the animal excrement can be transformed into something useful locally. This is my own experience – after picking up dung left by the buffalo in our village path for a few times using a metal spade and a plastic bucket (which used to be a bucket holding washing powder) and keeping the dung in the garden for use as fertiliser, I can now feel certain warmth whenever I see cow’s or buffalo’s dung on my way: the animal dung nourishes the soil, providing the nutrients it needs to grow the food we consume. Thinking in this way, we start to look at excrement and the world in a different way. Without other species and all the dirt, human beings cannot survive. We owe our gratitude to other animals and nature for their generosity. As an urban dweller for most of my life having developed all the modern hygiene habits, I also realise I have travelled a long way before coming to this point of appreciating from the bottom of my *heart* the excrement left by the cattle and buffaloes. I certainly brought the urban with me when I first came to settle in Mui Wo, and did things that I would be critical of today. In fact, among my criticisms of the urbanite, many are at the same time self-criticisms and self-reflections. While I moved the urban with me to Mui Wo, in the end I was also transformed by the place. The turning point to this transformation was when I started to open up my various

senses and use my body to intervene in space, instead of merely using my mind to reason and *watching* the nature from a distance.

vii. 'Surely, the State is the Sewer'

When it comes to the matter of excrement, the olfactory sense, which is undermined in modern society, is triggered. Many new residents to Mui Wo complain about the smell of night soil – whenever farmers apply it to their fields, a strong odour is produced in the environs. It is a particular smell of the countryside, but obviously not everyone is happy about it.

The EPD Officer whom I spoke to does not appreciate the smell she detected in the villages of Mui Wo either.

I don't know, as an outsider I walk into (the village)... after entering this trade, I've become very sensitive. Once I walk inside the village, I can smell it, knowing the village is not connected to the sewer. You can really smell it.

Obviously, the officer is referring to the (bad) hygienic conditions and is putting forward the case of the sewer. Historically, the sewer and olfaction have been the centre of public hygiene. In his study of the perception of odours in France in the eighteenth century, Alain Corbin shows the discourse of public health policy in that period mainly concerned the removal of odour in public places. Disinfection was in effect deodorization, and cleaning did not mean washing so much as draining. The problem of constructing sewers was already the subject of constant debate back then.⁵⁷ The prejudice against the sense of smell in modern society is well known, with Freud assigning it to anality. Kant excluded it from aesthetics. Smelling and sniffing are

⁵⁷ Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 89-92.

associated with animal behaviour. Due to its ephemeral nature, olfaction is believed to be unable to provide a persistent stimulus of thought. Hence the development of the sense of smell is thought to be inversely related to the development of intelligence. Also, in contrast to the senses of hearing and sight, olfaction is relatively useless in ‘civilised society’. Corbin cites a number of authors who argued against the importance of smell among the civilised. One of them, Count Albrecht von Haller, wrote in the eighteenth century that as men were destined to walk upright, he was to discover from a distance his food; social life and language were to enlighten him about the properties of the things that appeared to be edible. The best proof of this claim is that the sense of smell is more developed among ‘savages’ than among civilised men. Sniffing and smelling are thought to be signs of lack of refinement and ignorance of good manners.⁵⁸

Corbin argues it is from the sense of smell, rather than from the other senses, that we gain the fullest picture of the great dream of disinfection and of the new intolerances.⁵⁹ In Mui Wo in the present days, the new intolerances towards the smell of human and animal excrement are driving away experiences that are unacceptable to the hygiene discourse. As a result, with the intervention of the state, space is becoming increasingly homogeneous to reflect the order imposed by such discourse.

Paradoxically, while the sense of smell is discredited in modern and civilised society, the above examples, including people complaining about the smell of night soil, and the EPD Officer emphasising she can smell of uncleanness in villages not connected to the sewer, show that olfaction remains the most direct sense of ours to detect danger for self-preservation. The immediate solution to drive away dirt is to

⁵⁸ Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 6-7; 229.

⁵⁹ Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 231.

deodorise. Our environment strives to be odourless, which is equated with cleanliness. This echoes with Corbin's claim that to clean is not so much washing as draining.

However, the sense of olfaction also gives us joy and pleasure. Many Mui Wo residents cherish the fresh odour of ginger flowers when we ride our bicycle passing the flower fields. Yet, when large-scale drainage works were carried out around Pak Kung Bridge, which is a main access connecting the old town of Mui Wo and a number of inland villages, uprooting a large piece of ginger flower field, the plants were only treated as cash crops with the government offering compensation of a few thousand dollars to a local resident who would pick these flowers for sale. After completion of the works which converted the natural contours of a river into concrete embankments with straight lines, the government replanted some trees in the area such that it now looks similar to any re-aligned nullahs in other parts of the New Territories. The ginger flowers in the area were gone forever as a result. Apparently, the fragrance of the ginger flower field and the unique experience that it offers is a non-issue. The marginalisation of our olfactory sense in favour of other senses, in particular the visual, is undermining such multi-sensory experiences and rendering our space more homogeneous.

When Dominique Laporte wrote, 'Surely, the State is the Sewer',⁶⁰ there was a literal as well as symbolic meaning. Laporte's study traced the privatisation of shit in France in the sixteenth century ('To each his shit!'), and how this created the dualism of 'private' and 'public'. The State, as the embodiment of public good, assumed the

⁶⁰ Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit* (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 2002), 56.

position of purifying force.⁶¹ Shit had to be excluded from the official in order to establish the state's power to cleanse.⁶²

To Laporte, commerce and shit helped found the early modern state. 'Money... is pure insofar as it belongs to the State; so are, by association, those experts who are summoned to serve it. Power, too, is pure when legitimate and divine.'⁶³ The privatisation of shit – as each subject's business, each proprietor's responsibility – also created a dialectical other of the 'public'. The State initiates a contradictory discourse on waste that is nonetheless consistent with its definition as a state of capitalism: a discourse that urges proprietors to become ever richer, while casting a withering eye on the foul odour of their accumulations.⁶⁴

Much in the Foucauldian way, Laporte noted that rather than imposing absolute silence, power produces knowledge and technology around shit, with 'the most immaculate silence' combining with 'the most prolix chatter'. 'We dare not speak about shit. But, since the beginning of time, no other subject – not even sex – has caused us to speak so much'.⁶⁵

For Hawkins, while the sewer may be a great technological achievement, it is also what literally connects shit as public problem and shit as private secret. It links us to the state without any sense of direct intervention. They are where citizenship and subjectivity intermingle, with their technical and hygienic effects standing side by side with their ethical and social ones. Flushing and washing hands, rituals of cleaning and self-care may seem naturalised, but they are in fact product of very particular forms of

⁶¹ Laporte, *History of Shit*, 44-46.

⁶² Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 52.

⁶³ Laporte, *History of Shit*, 41.

⁶⁴ Laporte, *History of Shit*, 46.

⁶⁵ Laporte, *History of Shit*, 112.

reason. Since habitus has a history, the biological reality of shit is less the object than our relationships with it. It concerns how practices of personal waste management are caught up in larger political assemblages and become implicated in the constitution of the self.⁶⁶

The state, as the legitimate, purifying force, can now intervene in domestic hygienic behaviour. Through the construction of sewers, the state imposes a discipline on our body as to what to do and what not. In this case, the government seemingly provides services, but in fact it is power. In Foucault's account, the development of techniques for the disciplining of the body and the optimisation of its capacities, followed by the emergence of the population as an object of knowledge and control, has made possible a normalizing 'bio-power' in the modern era, watching over, governing, and administering the very 'life' of society.⁶⁷ As James Ferguson notes in his study of development programmes in Lesotho, under the development problematic the state apparatus is seen as a neutral instrument for implementing plans, while the government itself tends to appear as a machine for providing social services and engineering growth. The fact that 'government' is always the exercise of a power – the activity of rulers, not servants, is often underestimated or simply ignored.⁶⁸

... although 'development' discourse tends to see the provision of 'services' as the purpose of government, it is clear that the question of power cannot be written off quite so easily. 'Government services' are never simply 'services'; instead of conceiving this phrase as a reference simply to a 'government' whose purpose is to

⁶⁶ Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste*, 49.

⁶⁷ James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine- 'Development,' Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 274.

⁶⁸ Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, 194.

serve, it may be at least as appropriate to think of ‘services’ which serve to govern.⁶⁹

The above argument by Ferguson finds its echo in the construction of sewerage works in Mui Wo. When putting forward the case of the works, the EPD Officer emphasised the convenience and cost-effectiveness of government services:

The Water Supplies Department will collect the sewage charges. Each quarter would cost only less than \$20. Compared to the clearance of septic tank, it is much cheaper. Theoretically, you have to clear up the septic tank every quarter. Houses connected to our sewerage pipes do not have to clear up (their septic tank), and there will be no more blockage or overflowing problems, thus improving the local hygienic environment.

The proposition that after connecting to the government sewer, households no longer need to clear up their septic tank sounds very attractive. But behind this service is the intervention of the government together with its coercive power. The laws of Hong Kong require that ‘when communal sewers are provided in the vicinity and ready for connection, EPD may serve a notice on the owner of concerned premises requiring him to construct appropriate terminal manhole and other pipework for conveying all wastewaters to the communal sewer before a specified date’.⁷⁰ This point was reiterated by the EPD Officer in the interview.

According to the *Water Pollution Control Ordinance*, once we have built the sewerage pipes in the vicinity of houses, and if the EPD has served a notice,

⁶⁹ Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, 253.

⁷⁰ Environmental Protection Department, ‘Connections to Communal Sewers’, *A Guide to the Water Pollution Control Ordinance* last revised 28 April 2006, <http://www.epd.gov.hk/epd/english/environmentinhk/water/guide_ref/guide_wpc_wpc_11.html> (accessed 17 April 2012).

(owners) have to do it within a specific period. Otherwise, they have already violated the law.

While the government constructs and provides the sewer as service, it also stipulates the legal obligations of house owners. ‘The Government will provide and pay for the new communal sewers and the sewer linking the terminal manhole to the communal sewer. The owner of the premises is to pay for the terminal manhole and any pipework leading from the premises to the terminal manhole... The owner of the premises should properly maintain the terminal manhole constructed and any pipework leading from the premises to the terminal manhole’.⁷¹

According to Hawkins, drains express the literal connection between public and private. She notes that when modern sewers were being created in urban transformations of western countries in the early nineteenth century, they were seen as fundamental to the sanitary and moral integrity of the home, and they had impacts on conduct that were not experienced as coercive. At first, parents might have to tell their children to wash their hands or flush the toilet. But after some time, even these no longer have to be said, and disciplinary individualism is already in place. Compliance is voluntary and is exercised with a particular form of reason. This produces very specific techniques of the self. This domestic scene is made possible by the sewer.⁷²

I have mentioned earlier the dry toilet of the late Mok. Modern people would find Mok’s toilet a horror. I was also dumbfounded when I first saw it. While shitting is private, we would surrender our own shit outside our dwelling place (the sewer or septic tank in this case) immediately afterwards. However, over the time ever since I have

⁷¹ Environmental Protection Department, ‘Connections to Communal Sewers’.

⁷² Hawkins, ‘Down the Drain: Shit and the Politics of Disturbance’, 42-43.

witnessed Mok's toilet, I came to think: if he can take care of his own shit so carefully and effectively with such little means, is there anything else he cannot do to preserve himself as a human being? His run-down hut, built with his own hands with corrugated iron and other local materials, was a far cry from the modern building standards. Before he passed away in July 2011, he had been living in this hut for twenty years. He had been drinking water flowing from the hilltop transported to his house through water pipes he had connected himself. He had been selling Tofu dessert made by himself for a living. In other words, Mok took up responsibility for his everyday needs. Taking a cue from the symbolic meaning attributed to sewers by Laporte, we see that by keeping his own excrement under domestic care, Mok was also able to keep government intervention out.

Chapter 4 Techniques of going slow: cycling in Mui Wo

In autumn 2009, a series of screenings of US documentary *Return of the Scorcher* were held in Mui Wo.¹ Produced in 1992, the documentary looks at bicycle cultures across Asia, Europe and North America, with an ultimate aim to reflect on attitudes towards cycling in the US, where the practice is mainly seen as a recreational sport instead of a means of transport. The film regards Europe and Asia, in particular China, where cycling as a mode of transport is much more common, as more or less a ‘model’ for Americans.

The documentary features various shots taken in China in the early 1990s to show how widespread the practice of bicycling was in the country: people going to work or shopping on their bicycle, friends giving a lift to non-cyclists, or lovers going on a date on the two-wheeler. In front of the camera, New York bike designer George Bliss expresses amazement at the sea of cyclists that he has witnessed in the big cities. He also describes how cyclists would stop at road intersections until they get the numbers needed – the critical mass – to push their way through the heavy auto traffic. This observation actually gave rise to the name of one of the most important urban bike movements in recent years as ‘Critical Mass’, which originated in San Francisco in the 1990s but has since then spread to some 250 cities, towns, and suburbs around the world.²

Watching the film nearly two decades after its production, many people in this part of the world would easily spot its ‘archaism’ from the documentary’s narrative

¹ I would like to thank Video Power, organiser of the screenings, and Kan King Cheung, who brought the documentary to Hong Kong and did the Chinese subtitling.

² Ted White, ‘Reels on Wheels’, in *Critical Mass – Bicycling’s Defiant Celebration*, ed. Chris Carlsson (Edinburgh, London: AK Press, 2002), 145-152; Jeff Mapes, *Pedaling Revolution: How Cyclists are Changing American Cities* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2009), 95.

alone: with its rapid economic growth and ascension along the development path, China's major cities are no longer the 'heaven' for cycling, but are increasingly embracing the automobile as a mode of transport. This is especially true as the country's domestic automobile industry is developed as part of the strategy to propel economic growth, thus encouraging automobile consumption. In Beijing and Shanghai, the proportion of journeys made by cycle has continued to drop over the past two decades.³ According to a World Bank Report, in Guangzhou, those who cycle often do so because there is no affordable alternative. They are thus viewed as 'captive passengers'.⁴ The implication of this view is that once they have the means and opportunity, as more and more people do, they would abandon the bicycle for motorised transport.

When the film was first shown to a small group of Mui Wo residents, they got rather excited. If the film's message is that the bicycle should not be regarded as a recreational and leisure activity only, but also as a transport vehicle, this is exactly what the general attitudes are towards the bicycle in Mui Wo. Instead of considering the film 'dated', the general feeling was: we are exactly doing it. And the audience referred to the bicycle culture in Mui Wo not without some pride. While the importance of cycling as a mode of transport is in decline in China, and while the US is still quite some way from having a widespread everyday use of the bicycle,⁵ the two-wheeler is the main means of

³ Annemarie de Boom, Richard Walker and Rob Goldup, 'Shanghai: The Greatest Cycling City in the World?', *World Transport Policy and Practice*, 7(3) (2001): 53-59; Peter Cox, Dave Horton and Paul Rosen, 'Cycling and Society', in *Cycling and Society*, ed. Peter Cox, Dave Horton and Paul Rosen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 3.

⁴ World Bank, *Cities on the Move: A World Bank Urban Transport Strategic Review* (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 2002), 127.

⁵ According to David V. Herlihy, less than 1 percent of all urban trips are made by bicycle in the US, compared with European rates ranging from 5 percent in Italy to 30 percent in the Netherlands. See David Herlihy, *Bicycle: The History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 340. For general US attitudes towards cycling, see, for example, David Byrne, *Bicycle Diaries* (New York: Viking, 2009),

transport within Mui Wo – not to mention the fact that the place is part of Hong Kong, notorious for its cycle-unfriendly road conditions in general.

Meanwhile, from September to November 2009, I conducted individual, in-depth interviews with fourteen Mui Wo residents and one resident from Peng Chau, another outlying island of Hong Kong, who cycle on a daily basis. I used this method as here I would like these residents to sit back and reflect on a practice that they do every day. I need them to take some distance away from this practice that they have become (too) familiar, asking them to describe their feelings and experiences of bicycling in the community. I would like to find out if and how the way they practise cycling has changed over time. Does this everyday activity mean anything to them? Is there a relationship between cycling and the sense they make out of the different places in Mui Wo and of Mui Wo as a whole? In terms of methodology, it is the only chapter that I used in-depth interviews; in general, residents did not find it easy to use *words* to describe an *embodied* practice that they do every day. But as we shall see later, through in-depth, interactive dialogues with each of them, these residents were gradually able to discover feelings, meanings and senses related to cycling that they were not consciously aware of before. In other chapters, I used participant observation where I needed to learn of residents' interactions in a specific context, and analysis of texts of different nature where residents have recorded their reactions and reflections towards a specific issue or event.

i. Cycling and development

Mapes, *Pedaling Revolution*, or Robert Hurst, *The Cyclist's Manifesto: The Case for Riding on Two Wheels Instead of Four* (Guildford, Connecticut and Helena, Montana: Falcon Guides, 2009).

Raymond Williams noted that the most interesting modern usage of a group of words centred on ‘develop’ relates to certain ideas of the nature of economic change. In the middle of the nineteenth century, it was the idea that a society passes through definite evolutionary stages. In late nineteenth century the reference to an industrial and trading economy became strengthened and subsequently normalised in the twentieth century. The most significant change came after 1945, with the emergence of the new and influential word ‘underdeveloped’. Economies and societies are thus supposed to pass through predictable ‘stages of development’, according to a known model.⁶

Development has also been linked to the choice of transport solutions. This link, coupled with the linearity implied in the series of evolutionary stages, when encountering different modes of transport, creates a hierarchy of transport solutions with some inherently ‘superior’ modes versus some other ‘inferior’ modes. Based on such developmentalist logic, cycling has been linked to underdevelopment and one of its ‘symptoms’ – poverty, implying the ‘inferiority’ of cycling within a hierarchy of transport solutions. As we shall see shortly, the supposedly superiority of motor vehicles is experiencing significant challenges in developed countries after a long period of car-centrism there, but in the so-called developing countries, cycling, often seen as being unable to keep up with the pace of economic development and modernisation, is to be abandoned once a society reaches a more ‘advanced’ stage of development. I have noted above that China, once regarded as the heaven for mass cycling, is seeing a dramatic decline in the practice as a daily means of transport as the country on the whole becomes more developed and richer. This general trend across developing countries is confirmed

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords – A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 102-103.

in empirical studies. According to the World Bank report, Non-Motorised Transport (NMT), two major modes of which are walking and cycling, once accounted for between 40 and 60 percent of all trips in some major cities in Asia. In the poorer cities in Africa, that proportion was even higher. At the same time, in many large ‘developing’ countries, the proportion of bicycle trips has declined, and is continuing to decline. The report attributes this trend to, among others, increases in household incomes.⁷

In contrast, after a long period of heavy reliance on motor vehicles in the post Second World War period, coupled with a rise of environmental consciousness, many western countries have been witnessing a surge in urban movements to advocate cycling as a means of daily transport in big cities in recent years, including the ‘Critical Mass’ movements mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Almost without exception, these bike movements and campaigns came about as a reaction to the strong car-centrism in the West, especially the US, where many suburban communities are designed for the use of private cars as the primary means of transport by residents. Even in Amsterdam and other cities in the Netherlands, hailed as a model by many cycling activists, the turn to cycling was a reaction to the over-reliance on motor vehicles in the post-war years. According to an account by Jeff Mapes, for some time after the Second World War, Dutch planners thought that their traffic system should solely accommodate the car. As car ownership rapidly grew in the 1950s, Amsterdam officials once pondered over a plan to fill in up to fifteen of their canals to accommodate auto traffic. By the early 1970s, as traffic deaths were escalating, the historic centres of Dutch cities threatened, and the environmental movement gaining momentum, Amsterdam and other cities in the country saw regular protests against car-centric policies. Subsequently, in 1973, the oil embargo

⁷ World Bank, *Cities on the Move*, 125 - 127.

imposed by Arab countries aimed initially at two countries that supported Israel, namely the US and the Netherlands. This sudden ‘oil scarce’ made the Dutch realise that they could not rely on the car in an unlimited way. With a series of policy documents and demonstration projects, and with the founding of the Dutch Bicyclists Union, the national government reoriented its traffic philosophy. From then onwards, transit, bicycling and walking would be encouraged for short trips, particularly in urban areas. Policy aside, there are other reasons why the Netherlands is more successful than other western countries (e.g. the US) in promoting urban cycling across the country. For instance, geographically the country is composed of largely flatlands (well, this is the *Netherlands*); culturally, cycling runs deep in the Dutch culture.⁸

It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into more details of the practice of cycling in the Netherlands, but my argument is that in the West, the rise of urban cycling movements came after years of car centrism. To achieve a certain level of success, strong-willed efforts and policy initiatives have to be made by the government to prompt people to ride on two wheels instead of four. These measures are both persuasive (more bike-friendly infrastructure, for instance) and coercive (traffic legislation to give priority to cyclists over car drivers, etc.). In other words, while embracing the practice of daily cycling in these days, these countries had not been able to escape from the developmentalist logic, with the development of a very strong car culture before people realise this reliance on the motor vehicle cannot go on forever. Besides, the car remains a dominant mode of transport even in the Netherlands: around three-quarters of the (non-airplane) distance travelled by the Dutch is by car. The bicycle accounts for 27 percent

⁸ Mapes, *Pedaling Revolution*, 64-67.

of all trips travelled;⁹ admittedly this is a high percentage by many standards, but this means bike trips remain a less important transport option in comparison with the car. Some residents of Amsterdam cycle also because it is actually faster than driving a car in the congested city centre.¹⁰

Instead of a conscious effort to challenge car-centrism, the predominance of cycling in Mui Wo is above all a manifestation of the local culture, which is characterised by a slow pace of life and casualness in interpersonal relations. While car usage is becoming increasingly common in Mui Wo and other parts of South Lantau, unlike the West, car-centrism has never been part of the culture of Mui Wo. Of course, the fact that many areas in Mui Wo are inaccessible by motor vehicles as they are paved with narrow, small paths, only helps to discourage the use of car. It also means cycling and walking come as a logical solution for residents to go from place to place within the community. As I have mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, the sense of general trust in the community is conducive to cycling, as bike theft is one of the main deterrents to people using the bicycle as their daily commuting vehicle. All in all, cycling goes hand in hand with the culture of Mui Wo. One does not have to launch a campaign to educate residents about the benefits of cycling as a means of transport in Mui Wo, nor are deliberate policy initiatives or bike-friendly facilities necessary to encourage people to ride on the two wheels. Well on the contrary, even without ‘proper’ bike facilities like an impeccable cycle track or a well-functioning bicycle park, and in the face of increasingly pedestrian- and cycle-unfriendly road conditions, Mui Wo residents just continue to ride on their bicycle every day. In most other places, incentives have to be

⁹ Mapes, *Pedaling Revolution*, 64-65.

¹⁰ Mapes, *Pedaling Revolution*, 78.

devised to encourage people to take out their bike; in Mui Wo, disincentives would have to be used to discourage people from cycling. Cycling has been embedded deeply in the culture of Mui Wo.

In refuting the developmentalist logic, I argue in this chapter that we do not have to go through a car-dominated culture before we can talk about technical progress in transport solutions. Cycling can remain as the predominant mode of transport in a community while residents can achieve technical progress at the same time. In discussing the popularisation of utility cycling in Hong Kong, many hip urbanites would immediately refer to Amsterdam, Paris or New York for their experiences, but at home in Hong Kong, Mui Wo actually offers a very unique case by any standards.

Besides, among some cycling enthusiasts, there is a tendency to chase after ever more high-performing and sophisticated vehicles. In fact, within the discourse of development, perhaps more powerful is a technological evolutionary narrative about the bicycle. In the next section, I am going to discuss how this emphasis on technology or, more precisely, machine technology, leads to a hierarchy of transport solutions.

ii. Bicycle technology

Science and technology has been the marker of civilization *par excellence* since the nineteenth century, when machines became the index of civilisation, ‘the measure of men’.¹¹ In their work discussing the modelling of transport technologies, Cox and Van De Walle criticise the ‘false promise of development’ and the ‘evolutionary determinism’

¹¹ Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1989).

it implies.¹² In their view, highly related to this is the writing of bicycle history, which has much bearing on how we see this mode of transport.

The history of the bicycle with which we are most familiar tends to present a story of a machine undergoing a series of logical changes over time, much as any other technology. This history takes us from the bicycle's primitive first beginnings, through a succession of rational, progressive steps, to a final, mature form in the classic diamond-framed machine we recognise today.¹³

According to such a narrative, the bicycle would have achieved its final form before the end of the nineteenth century. In this way, it would be tempting to see the bicycle as 'fundamentally anachronistic in today's society, as superseded or out-evolved by motorcycles and motor cars'.¹⁴

For Cox and Van De Walle, David Herlihy's *Bicycle: The History*¹⁵ is a typical example of how bicycle history is written. In it, Herlihy identifies a number of key stages along the developmental path that leads to the bicycle as we know it today. He sees the pre-history of the bicycle in Karl Von Drais's running machine. Subsequently, pedals were added to the front wheel which constituted a major breakthrough towards the bicycle 'proper'. Subsequent search for greater speed and comfort, and safety, led to other breakthroughs in bicycle development. Finally, from the late 1880s the pneumatic tyre was introduced and established the design of the diamond framed bicycle.

According to Herlihy, this introduction of the diamond framed bicycle enabled the cycle

¹² Cox and Van De Walle, 'Bicycles Don't Evolve'.

¹³ Cox and Van De Walle, 'Bicycles Don't Evolve', 113.

¹⁴ Cox and Van De Walle, 'Bicycles Don't Evolve', 113.

¹⁵ David Herlihy, *Bicycle: The History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

to be understood as a potential mode of transport, as only with this design was mass production in varying sizes feasible.

For Cox and Van De Walle, such a historical narrative is disputable as it forecloses any technological innovations after this ‘final form’. The tacit implication of Herlihy’s historical narrative is that the development of the bicycle reached its fulfilment during the 1890s.¹⁶ Cox and Van De Walle consider such an ‘evoliner’ approach to the technological development of bicycle problematic, since it builds a ‘pseudo-Darwinist model’. Its primary focus is on the formation of a ‘most evolved’ form, and its taking over of all ‘lesser’ species. To the two authors, the implications of this narrative of ‘evolutionary progress’ are profound and deeply influential, especially for those concerned about the problems of transport technology and having the desire to move away from car-dependence. Their concern is that transport technologies with great potential but breaking away from the conceived ‘ideal’ type are easily marginalised. For instance, recumbent cycles, with a seated riding position, feet forward of the body, are regarded as a ‘dead end’ in cycle development despite its potential for higher efficiency. Such has been the case for developments in the technology and production of the velomobile too. According to the authors, a velomobile, depicted as a specialist form of recumbent cycles, is a form of pedal cycle (two, three or four wheeled) with a form of enclosure or bodywork serving both to protect the rider and to increase the aerodynamic efficiency of the vehicle. This marginalisation of recumbent cycles and velomobiles means the motor-powered vehicles would always be deemed as superior to the cycle. ‘However “developed” and “fit for purpose” a human powered vehicle may be, within

¹⁶ Cox and Van De Walle, ‘Bicycles Don’t Evolve’, 116.

the master frame of linear evolutionary development... it is rendered primitive and backward by virtue of its place within the hierarchy.’¹⁷

Further, in the narrative history of transport technologies, it is above all the ‘metaphor of evolution’ that is applied. This metaphor is so absorbed in the descriptions of sociotechnical change that it has become invisible. It has profound implications for our understandings of sociotechnical change:

Most significant is the link between the evolutionary metaphor and a hierarchical depiction of evolutionary change which includes an implicit notion of obsolescence. Any form of transport ‘further back’ along the evolutionary narrative is rendered lesser, anachronistic and outmoded by its superior, more evolved ‘offspring’.¹⁸

While ‘old technologies’, for instance the cycle, still remain, they are regarded as obsolete or archaic curiosities. They must always be assessed against the technologies that have ‘replaced’ them and rendered them outmoded. There may still be developments – even highly sophisticated ones – in ‘obsolete’ technologies, but these are generally reserved for highly context-specific, specialist applications, predominantly in sport and leisure rather than utility use.¹⁹

For Cox and Van De Walle, the velomobile is an opportunity to upset the ‘evolinear’ model. They suggest to reconceptualise the velomobile as something other than the car and the bicycle, as this would not only increase its social acceptability and uptake, ‘but at the same time disturb and destabilise the dominant evolinear narrative of

¹⁷ Cox and Van De Walle, ‘Bicycles Don’t Evolve’, 115-119.

¹⁸ Cox and Van De Walle, ‘Bicycles Don’t Evolve’, 118.

¹⁹ Cox and Van De Walle, ‘Bicycles Don’t Evolve’, 118 – 119.

transport technologies in ways beneficial to cycling and modes of mobility attuned to sustainable futures in general’.²⁰

I agree with Cox and Van De Walle’s critique of the dominant ‘evoliner’ approach to bicycle history and its significant implications on our choice of transport vehicles. This provides a forceful analysis as to why, despite all the known benefits of cycling, this mode of transport remains persistently stigmatised as backward and inferior, especially in ‘developing countries’ as shown by the empirical research by the abovementioned World Bank Report. Their work helps us to understand the position of the bicycle within the powerful discourse of development. Above all, their new model tells us there is no such thing as the ‘most evolved’ solution. Different types of individual modes of transport are just *different*, serving their respective purposes.

However, Cox and Van De Walle have their entire focus put on the bicycle as an *instrument* and not cycling as an embodied practice, and discuss the progress of transport technologies at the machine level. This in effect falls back to the values (machines as ‘the index of civilisation’ as noted above) embedded in ‘development’. While they are critical of the linear evolutionary model of transport technologies, they do not question the obsession with scientised technology and machines in developmentalism as such. Their suggestion to include the velomobile in a non-evoliner transport solution model as an answer to the linear one, is in effect always using a machine, albeit non-motorised, to challenge the motorised machine including the motorcycle and the car. The implication is that we could not talk about human progress without having achieved progress in scientised technology – another thought prevalent within the discourse of development.

²⁰ Cox and Van De Walle, ‘Bicycles Don’t Evolve’, 126.

A second implication underlying the focus on machine technology is that there is technological change only when there is a difference in machine design. This is evident in Cox and Van De Walle's model. Dissatisfied with the dominant evolinear model which sees the bicycle as mundane and outmoded, they use the velomobile to construct a new non-linear model of vehicles. They use this model to argue for the non-inferiority of bicycles or any other human-powered modes of transport, that there is indeed another new category of vehicle, on which entrepreneurial designers are constantly working towards better designs. While I agree with the authors that the evolutionary account of changing patterns in transport technologies has narrowed the scope of vehicle development, and while I do not doubt the contribution of velomobiles to the general development of human-powered or more sustainable vehicles, to discuss technological changes within their model means that such changes can be effected by trained vehicle designers only. In other words, whereas 'cycling resonates with the themes of autonomy and self-sufficiency and with environmental, social and economic sustainability that are the hallmarks of alternative development models',²¹ this emphasis on machines embedded in the model excludes the possibility for the cyclist to initiate changes on her/his own body techniques, and thus to determine what kind of changes and progress most suited to her/his own needs.

A third implication is the demand for/on infrastructure. Higher performance and efficiency as compared to the bicycle, is one of the advantages cited by proponents of velomobiles and recumbent cycles. This is made possible by moving away from an upright rider position to reduce air drag and thereby increase efficiency, enabling higher speed or greater distance for the same energy output. But this also results in a heavier,

²¹ Cox, Horton and Rosen, 'Cycling and Society', 4-5.

more complex, larger vehicle when compared to the bicycle.²² A ‘higher performing’ machine would require roads of ‘higher standard’ in terms of paving materials and road width. This is not a problem for most urban roads, but in a rural setting like Mui Wo, where some paths are winding and narrow (just over 1 m wide), the introduction of a machine more complex than the bicycle would require widening the paths and other possible measures, like the installation of railings for ‘better safety’. Indeed, tricycles, which are increasingly popular in Mui Wo apparently because they can carry more passengers and goods, but which at the same time are bulkier than the bicycle, have difficulty in accessing some of the small paths. I would not be surprised if in the future these paths are widened to accommodate these bulkier vehicles. Further, if the search for ever more sophisticated science and technology is put at the core of development, a significant and seemingly unavoidable consequence is that development is only possible with the intervention of ‘experts’ and government (for infrastructure upgrades, for instance). The growth of professional expertise and machine technology has led to a de-skilling of day-to-day activity and the waning of craftsmanship.²³ When more and more concerning our daily life are done by professionals and the machine, the average person is left only with the most mundane and simple task to perform. S/he hardly has a role to play in any improvement in her/his daily life, because her/his skills would not match the ‘professional requirements’ or the tasks performed by machines. In this way, to the average person ‘progress’ is always an external process, as any improvements related to our daily life can only be effected by experts or progress in machine technology. Sennett argues that craftsmanship is an enduring, basic human impulse to do a job well. A good

²² Cox and Van De Walle, ‘Bicycles Don’t Evolve’.

²³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 22; Sennett, *Together*, 7-9.

craftsman conducts a dialogue between practice and thinking. Who we are also arises from what our bodies can do, and the capacities our bodies have to shape physical things and perform physical tasks are the same capacities we draw on in social relations.²⁴ As such, de-skilling also causes people to lose the capacity of cooperation needed to make a complex society work.²⁵ In this view, the professionalization and modernisation of development is disempowering to the average person.

Instead of using another machine technology, albeit non motor-powered, so as to claim the cycle's well-deserved place in a 'non-evoliner' model as devised by Cox and Van De Walle, I propose to re-align our focus to cycling as an embodied practice rather than focusing on the bicycle as a machine, and look at the possibilities of technological changes. There is at least one point I agree with Cox and Van De Walle on the subject of technological change: '[t]echnological change happens, but the way we describe the changes is a matter of will.'²⁶ Like Cox and Van De Walle, we can opt to focus on technological changes at the level of the machine. But here I want to show that changes do happen even without the intervention of new machines, that cycling is not 'condemned only to repeat past patterns of use',²⁷ even the same, old bicycle is used day by day. But before I do this, I would like to examine another notion so precious to modernity: speed.

iii. Going slow

Rapid mobility, often across long distances, is a trait of modernity. 'It is not the pedestrian flâneur who is emblematic of modernity but rather the train passenger, car

²⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

²⁵ Sennett, *Together*, 9.

²⁶ Cox and Van De Walle, 'Bicycles Don't Evolve', 129.

²⁷ Cox and Van De Walle, 'Bicycles Don't Evolve', 113.

driver and jet plane passenger.’²⁸ The search for speed did not escape the attention of Baudelaire’s celebrated flâneurs, and they were to protest against people’s ‘industriousness’ in their own style: ‘Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them.’ Benjamin noted if the flâneurs had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. ‘But this attitude did not prevail; Taylor, who popularised the watchword “Down with dawdling!” carried the day.’²⁹

It should also be noted that cycling has once been understood as both a product and a carrier of modernity. But it is also this continuing search for more rapid mobility that results in the predominant view that bicycle has long been ‘overtaken’ by motor vehicles. Of course this is closely related to the development of machine technology as discussed above – as we look for ever faster vehicles, new technology is needed. By the same token, technology has ‘more rapid mobility’ as its objective. The notion ‘faster is better’, or for that matter, ‘slower is inferior’ was a value firmly embedded in the development discourse. However, just as extreme car dependence has triggered backlash in the form of various urban cycling movements in western countries, the over-emphasis on rapidity has also been met with various ‘slow’ movements across developed countries in recent years – slow food, slow city, slow sex, etc. Before having a look at these slow movements which come about as responses to the excesses and frenzy of an ever quicker pace of life, I will first turn to a discussion on how speed is related to economic production. As we shall see, this discussion will provide us with the basis for understanding the slow movements.

²⁸ Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space* (London, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), 252.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 54.

David Harvey has shown that the history of capitalism had been characterised by speed-up in the pace of life. Command over space and time is a crucial element in any search for profit. It was in the course of exploring space that the mediaeval merchant also discovered the fundamental concept of the 'price of time'. There are two implications to this 'discovery': First, merchants and masters created a new 'chronological net' in which daily life was caught. It was symbolized by clocks and bells that called workers to labour and merchants to market, separated from the 'natural' rhythms of agrarian life, and divorced from religious significations. The nascent bourgeoisie appropriated the explorations of the calendar and time measurement that had been promoted by the monastic orders in order to impose religious discipline, so as to organise and discipline the populations of mediaeval towns to a new and secular labour discipline.

Second, as money has no meaning independent of time and space, it is always possible to pursue profit (or other forms of advantage) by altering the ways time and space are used and defined. The faster the capital launched into circulation can be recuperated, the greater the profit will be. The definitions of 'efficient spatial organization' and of 'socially necessary turnover time' are fundamental norms against which the search for profit is measured.

For Harvey, the general effect of this development is for capitalist modernisation to be largely about 'speed-up and acceleration in the pace of economic processes and, hence, in social life'.³⁰ In this way, rapidity and the efficient use of time have become the cultural and economic order of capitalism. Likewise, Michael Adas argued how time became a commodity that could be 'saved', 'spent', or 'wasted' with the rise and spread

³⁰ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 228- 230.

of the factory system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Labourers sold their time while entrepreneurs bought it. Work time and leisure time became clearly demarcated, resulting in a work ethic that stressed time thrift, human subordination to machine rather than natural or personal rhythms, and productivity rather than individual skills or expression.³¹

According to Adas, in the context of imperialism expansion, the ability to manage clock time is also a symbol of European supremacy, a justification for colonialism:

[B]y the early 19th Century, the Europeans who explored, colonized and sought to Christianise Africa and Asia were setting out from societies dominated by clocks, railway schedules, and mechanical rhythms. They ‘went out’ to cultures still closely attuned to the cycles of nature, to societies in which leisure was savored, patience was highly regarded, and everyday life moved at a pace that most Western intruders found enervating if not downright exasperating.³²

However, after years of pursuing ever higher speed as a socioeconomic objective in many countries due to the abovementioned search for more profits, in recent years, a number of developed countries have been witnessing a surge in social movements calling for a slowdown in the pace of life. In 2004, Canadian journalist Carl Honoré published his first book *In Praise of Slowness*,³³ which instantly became an international bestseller and was translated into more than 30 languages, including a Chinese language

³¹ Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, 242.

³² Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, 243.

³³ Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004).

version published in Taiwan in the subsequent year. Honoré has since written two more books on slowness, including *The Slow Fix*³⁴ published in 2013.

The call to slowing down is originally related to the concern about the loss of traditions. As noted by Honoré, Slow Food, one of the first slow movements, is strongest in Europe, which has a rich tradition of indigenous cuisine.³⁵ It was conceived as a movement to react against the high-speed, high-turnover culture of the global food industry and was based on the artisanal tradition in producing food in such European countries as Italy, Spain and France. This explains why Slow Food was first founded in Italy in 1986 and three years later, International Slow Food movement was launched in Paris.³⁶ However, this effort to spread the philosophy around the world of going slow in producing and consuming food quickly becomes commodified. In an upbeat mood, Honoré declares: ‘Everywhere you looked, someone was turning the principles of Slow Food into profit’. The author also notes that slow food campaigners are not against global capitalism ‘per se’, and notes, for instance, that the ‘virtues of globalization are on full display’ at its biannual salon held in Turin in 2002.³⁷ A commodified, globalised slow food movement is appropriating taste to generate profits. Among the slow movements, Slow Food is also the best known and followed in Hong Kong, with newspaper columnists and bloggers regularly write about and promote the movement.

As mentioned above, Slow Food originated from the concern about artisanal traditions, or the loss of such traditions due to the speedy turnover of the global food

³⁴ Carl Honoré, *The Slow Fix: Solve Problems, Work Smarter, and Live Better in a World Addicted to Speed* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

³⁵ Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 61-65.

³⁶ ‘Slow Food: Birth and Growth of an International Association’, <http://www.slowfood.com/international/7/history> (accessed 4 June 2013).

³⁷ Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 63.

industry and the global standardisation of tastes. This concern coincides with the middle class' concern for taste which undoubtedly explains the quick success of the slow movements. According to Pierre Bourdieu, taste is 'a class culture turned into nature'; it is embodied. Taste in food helps to shape the class body, as it depends on the idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body. As such, whereas the working classes are more attentive to the strength of the (male) body than its shape, the professional classes 'prefer products that are tasty, health-giving, light and not fattening'.³⁸ Thanks to the commodification of the slow movements, middle-class consumers in cities, concerned about a slim and healthy body, can now have access to non-industrial, artisanal products from the countryside. Consuming slowly-made, natural, healthy products is a way for the middle-class to take care of and shape their body. It is also a way for them to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. The commodification of taste in food has also given rise to yet another chic lifestyle, and in tandem a stylish shopping experience is sought after. Slowness has become a fetish, with one of the slogans of the movements being 'Slow is Beautiful'. As a reflection of how the slow movement has become a kind of chic (consumption) behaviour with a show of elaborate fineness, here is a scene in one high-end gourmet store as described by Honoré:

Neal's Yard Dairy, in London's Covent Garden, stocks around eighty cheeses from small producers in Britain and Ireland. The shop is a feast for the senses. Behind the counter and along the painted wooden shelves, crumbly Wensleydales jostle with creamy Stiltons, giving off a delightful aroma. Flavour is king here. Neal's Yard sells a range of artisanal cheddars, each with its own distinct character. The one made by Keen's is soft, a little waxy, with sharp, grassy notes.

³⁸ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 190. [original emphasis]

Montgomery cheddar is drier, firmer, with a nutty, savoury taste. Lincolnshire Poacher is smooth and mellow, with a hint of Alpine sweetness. A Scottish cheddar from the Isle of Mull, where grass is scarce and the cows mainly survive on draff from a local brewery, is much paler than the rest, with a wild, almost gamey taste.

When it comes to pleasure, factory cheese simply cannot compete. Most leave little impression on the taste buds. The flavours in an artisanal cheese, by contrast, develop slowly in the month, and then linger, tickling the palate like a fine wine. “Often a customer will taste a cheese, not be very impressed, and then move down the counter,” says Randolph Hodgson, the founder and manager of Neal’s Yard Dairy. “After a few seconds, though, the flavour hits them. Their head suddenly turns and they say: ‘Wow, that actually tastes really nice.’”³⁹

The moneyed class are rich, but money alone cannot satisfy them. They are looking for a certain quality of life. Factory-produced, pre-packaged Kraft cheese can no longer satisfy their demanding tastes. With a trained, fine taste, they now invest more time in savouring foods and are able to distinguish the nuances of eighty kinds of cheese. In this case, fine taste is a prestigious know-how that they use to legitimise their economic success, and to distinguish themselves as a class to prove that they deserve the money and a good life. Jean Baudrillard noted that in the stead of use value, or relation to needs, it is rather symbolic exchange values that are fundamental to consumption. These are the ‘value of social prestation, of rivalry and, at the limit, of class discriminants’. To transmute their economic status into ‘inherited grace’, Baudrillard noted that it is characteristic of the ‘privileged classes’ to buy ‘bygone’ furniture in

³⁹ Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 68.

which the stigmata of industrial production and primary functions are eliminated. Even the salaried middle class seek to ‘consecrate’ their relative status from the lower classes by buying ‘rustic furniture’.⁴⁰ Taking a cue from Baudrillard’s discussions here, slowness allows the stigmata of industrial production and primary functions to be eliminated. In the consumption of slow food, for instance, the primary function of eating with the purpose of merely filling up the stomach is done away; in stressing ‘artisanal’ traditions in the making of slow food products, the trait of industrial production and the associated time-efficiency is also gone.

Along with global capital, the transnational capitalist class are being brought to the so-called global cities, bringing with them their class taste. Thanks also to the global media, with TV programmes featuring international celebrity chefs broadcast on TV channels for instance, as well as the global travel industry, increasingly the local middle class seek to consecrate their class status by looking for sophistication in their food consumption. The globalisation of trade, including the trade of slow food, means that high-salaried consumers around the world can now have access to a variety of fresh produce made ‘slowly’ in an artisanal way in another corner of the globe. This has also triggered the transformation of space, giving rise to the mushrooming of high-end retail premises in the so-called global cities. Saskia Sassen has noted that high-income gentrification in these cities is linked to the profound transformation of capitalism; it has resulted, among others, in the development of high-priced, fashionable shopping places.⁴¹ It suffices to go to City Super, a high-end supermarket or any chic gourmet store in Hong Kong to witness the trend. The fetishisation of slowness means that people

⁴⁰ Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 31-45.

⁴¹ Sassen, *The Global City*, 261.

not only demand to consume ‘slow food’, but also demand attention and time from the stores. This is why City Super and other gourmet stores have a fleet of English-speaking workers standing behind the counter all day long readily cutting, weighing and packing cheeses, charcuterie and other delicacies on demand for high-taste customers. Many of these workers are of Southeast Asian origins. Far from equality among people, behind this slowness is class exclusiveness. Sassen has pointed out that high-income gentrification is labour-intensive and demands a vast supply of low-wage workers, and so inequalities are a result, instead of a haphazard occurrence of global capitalism.⁴² The globalisation and commodification of the slow movement has reinforced this trend of inequalities within global cities.

More often than not, ‘high taste’ is made equivalent to Western or Japanese taste, and this hierarchy is achieved through elaborate classifications, like the classifications of different kinds of cheese as noted above. Such classifications render legitimacy to the claims of superiority. There are local Hong Kong and other Asian delicacies on the shelves of City Super, but all in all, they are the minority and become the exotic on their own soil. True, this time round, it is not the golden arch of McDonald’s that is being exported to different corners of the world, but a variety of gourmet foods from Italy, Spain, France or Japan. Ironically, what started off as a preoccupation of the preservation of local traditions turns out to be a global business exporting to other countries, with the selling point resting on the cultural superiority of European and Japanese ‘fine’ cultures.

These traits of commodification, class distinction and cultural superiority that I identify in the global slow movements above, and their connections with global

⁴² Sassen, *The Global City*, 285.

capitalism and the inequalities thus engendered, are a far cry from the slowness that is part of the culture of Mui Wo, and that is manifested in the practice of cycling there. Rather than pursuing slowness for its own sake or displaying the ‘beauty’ of slowness in an elaborate fashion, slowness is an everyday business in Mui Wo, so ordinary that it almost goes unnoticed. As I will show in this chapter, slowness in cycling can be achieved as a progress in one’s body techniques in response to everyday situations. For instance, going slow on one’s bike is needed to trail behind somebody walking if the cyclist does not want to tinkle the bell or overtake the pedestrian. Every cyclist, regardless of class, gender and age, can improve her/his cycling techniques using her/his own body, and nobody is absolutely superior in every single technical aspect (e.g. those who can ride fast uphill may not be good at negotiating a narrow curve). This is what I would call the equality of body techniques, by which every cyclist can participate equally in one way or another. This is a progress that is not class-exclusive, quantified or commodified, and can be achieved using an old, worn-out bike. Finally, instead of consuming a fashionable mode of slowness imported from other countries and chasing after a culturally ‘superior’ lifestyle, the practice of cycling in Mui Wo is developed locally over the years to become the main means of daily, utilitarian transport in the community today.

If, as noted earlier, capitalism has been characterised by speed-up in the pace of life, slowness is possible in Mui Wo because all is not encroached upon by the capitalistic production logic. In contrast, many people identify themselves with the slow movements because they find that going ever faster can no longer increase their production efficiency. From a certain point, as they find out, efficiency can only be

raised by slowing down. This reminds us of the commodification of leisure and entertainment, by which getting out of production (temporarily) is a way for workers to go back to production in a better shape. As noted by Honoré: ‘It is common sense: we are less productive when we are tired, stressed, unhappy or unhealthy.’⁴³ In other words, slowness is appreciated here because it allows productivity to be raised, and thus is an integral part of production. One informant told Honoré that by doing Yoga, he can easily enter the ‘Slow Thinking mode’.

Often he arrives at class feeling stressed about a problem at work. After an hour of relaxing his mind and slowly bending his body this way and that, a solution sometimes comes to him. ‘My mind must be working through stuff on a subconscious level when I do yoga,’ he says. ‘Some of my greatest ideas hit me when I’m walking home after class’.⁴⁴

It is thus not a coincidence that Oriental practices with a focus on the slow approach towards the mind and body like Yoga, Qigong or Taichi are becoming increasingly popular among the middle classes in western countries and Hong Kong. Everything has its limits; speed seems to have stretched the human mind and body to their limits in the ever accelerating world, and so people realise they need to go slow. However, behind the search for slowness, the goal of higher efficiency remains the same: sometimes to be faster you have to be slower.⁴⁵ In many aspects, the slow movements are inseparable from time-efficiency. For one thing, if fresh produce, however slowly made, is to be transported around the globe, it can only be done by an efficient global transport and logistics system. This is the case because with the globalisation of slow

⁴³ Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 191.

⁴⁴ Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 132.

⁴⁵ Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 134.

food, the location of production of slow food and that of the end consumer can now lie at a long distance from each other, but at the same time food quality is on top of the priority of Slow Food. This can be tricky for food produce that demands to be served fresh. To arrange lettuce slowly grown in a remote, small farm in southern Italy to be placed on the dining table of a high-end restaurant in Central, Hong Kong for the client to consume slowly while the veggie is still fresh and crispy means that after harvest, it needs to be packed and transported from this small farm to Hong Kong, which lies at more than 9,200 km away, in a very quick way. This means good roads and even highways must lie in the proximity of the small farm, and that there are regular flights between Italy and Hong Kong. In other words, the now globalised Slow Food is not possible without a speedy global transportation system.

In some other cases, slower is actually faster. Consider the so-called SuperSlow weight-lifting movement, in which it takes twenty seconds to lift and lower a weight, compared to the conventional six seconds. On the surface it is slower. But as noted by Honoré, this slowness actually encourages the muscles to rebuild more quickly and thoroughly, and the fact that it takes very little time – the workout is so intense that it never lasts more than 20 minutes – is considered as an advantage.⁴⁶ In this way, a slim and healthy-looking body, i.e. the body of the middle class, can be cultivated in a time-efficient way.

As such, in many ways, the slow movements have not been able to go beyond the logic of economic production, including the concern of time-efficiency. Going slow is just another way for people to become more time-efficient in their leisure activities and exercises, such that they can launch themselves into production in a better form more

⁴⁶ Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 140-141.

quickly. All in all, the Slow approach as advocated by Honoré or the commodified slow movements does not contest the search for ever higher profits by capitalists that is driving a speedy world in the first place. Making profits out of slowness is also considered as a legitimate move. So-called slowness is just offered as a solution when acceleration no longer works to increase profits and efficiency. Under this logic, time devoted to production does not become shorter. In some cases, it is even longer – in Hamburg, doctors now offer appointments after 7 pm and on Saturday mornings to lighten the time pressure on working mothers.⁴⁷ This initiative does not question the working time of working mothers or why they cannot take leave to bring their sick children to see the doctor during working hours. It also means the working time of doctors becomes longer.

As I will show later in this chapter, instead of ‘legitimising’ economic production time or even extending it, the slowness in cycling in Mui Wo allows us to recuperate lived time that is being lost in production. Slowness, coupled with cycling as an embodied practice, also helps to open up our various senses which, in many ways, are being undermined in the modern mode of capitalistic production.

iv. Techniques

In the discussion of bicycle technology by Cox and Van De Walle, time-efficiency is assumed as a goal – the velomobile is an improvement to the bicycle because it is ‘more efficient’, which, in most cases, is in effect faster. With their inherent aerodynamic efficiency, velomobiles are capable of higher sustained speeds than cycles, and especially challenge the image of non-motorised vehicles as ‘slow’.

⁴⁷ Honoré, *In Paradise of Slowness*, 97.

One of [the evolinear model's] assumptions is that the bicycle is a slow vehicle, long since overtaken by motorcycles and cars. This assumption results in considerable sums of money being spent on infrastructure projects designed for cycling as a slow, leisure activity, which can lead to unsatisfactory cycling infrastructure for the transport cyclist. In fact, the urban cyclist can move at an average speed higher than other forms of urban transport. So conceptual assumptions made about the bicycle can result in measures (such as route choice, surface dressings and access barriers) which explicitly reinforce those prejudices.⁴⁸

The authors use the fact that the bicycle could attain high speeds to support the case of human-powered vehicles. While they argue cycle is not inherently better or worse than being motorised (it is just different), according to their model, within the same category of vehicles, speed is a parameter: a faster cycle is technologically more advanced than a slower one, and infrastructure should also favour higher cycling speed.

Speed *does* seem to be a main concern of recumbent cycles and their users. 'Velocity Racers' is the name of the shop that sells recumbent cycles in Science Park in Hong Kong. In a YouTube link posted on the company website, apparently to promote the use of recumbents in the territory, one recumbent rider remarks: 'It's so easy to hit 42 km/ hr on this bike'.⁴⁹

As we have seen above, if the bicycle is viewed as 'outmoded' and 'slow', it is because modernity and the history of capitalism attest high value to rapid mobility, high

⁴⁸ Cox and Van De Walle, 'Bicycles Don't Evolve', 126-127.

⁴⁹ The cyclist concerned self-recorded his journey on the highway from Science Park, Tai Po, to Shatin and posted it on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=HK&hl=zh-TW&v=GK92lombmIE> (accessed 6 December 2009).

speed and time-efficiency in general. As we have seen above, the slow movements do not contest the fundamentals underlying these values, i.e. the search for ever greater profits in the modern capitalistic mode of production. Hence, slowness is just a way to achieve better time-efficiency when speed reaches its limits.

In contrast, in agrarian societies, life largely follows natural rhythms and cycles. When European colonial settlers came to Asia, they saw this lack of time-efficiency 'backward'. This attitude partly contributes to the European supremacy view, which provides moral justifications for colonising 'uncivilised' parts of the world. Now instead of pursuing a machine technology that would render the cycle 'modern' and faster, can we affirm the value of the slow and the lag in their own terms? Can the 'anachronistic' itself be a resistance to the linear, progressive approach?

For Cox, Horton and Rosen, to reclaim 'the archaic' is directly to challenge the thrust of externally imposed, 'top-down' patterns of development.⁵⁰ By 'archaic' the authors are referring to the practice of cycling, especially in the light of an automobile-dominated landscape. In this regard, I think Raymond Williams' concept of the 'residual' is helpful. For Williams, the complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions (traditions, institutions and formations), but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements. This is why the so-called 'epochal' analysis, which emphasises only the selected and abstracted dominant system, is problematic. To correct this, Williams considers the introduction and differentiation of the 'residual' and the 'emergent' necessary, such that while the epochal hypothesis is retained and the

⁵⁰ Cox, Horton and Rosen, 'Cycling and Society', 4-5.

‘dominant’ spoken of, the internal dynamic relations of any actual process can also be recognised. To him the ‘residual’ is different from the ‘archaic’.

I would call the ‘archaic’ that which is wholly recognized as an element of the past, to be observed, to be examined, or even on occasion to be consciously ‘revived’, in a deliberately specializing way. What I mean by ‘residual’ is very different. The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.⁵¹

In this way, certain experiences, meanings and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are lived and practised on the basis of the residue of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. For Williams, it is crucial to distinguish this aspect of the residual, which may have an alternative or oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture.⁵² Think of the case of the bicycle. The idea of cycling is largely residual in the dominant automobile culture, but it is also incorporated as a form of leisure and healthy exercise, as well as a chic lifestyle in many developed countries; and the bicycle as a machine can also serve the automobile industry in terms of technology. What I am interested in are the alternative and even oppositional aspects. In this chapter, I will try to affirm the value of slowness. Progress by definition is gradual improvement. As long as there is improvement (in techniques, so to speak), speeding up is not the only way to progress. Slowing down can also be regarded as progress. While cycling is the

⁵¹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122.

⁵² Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.

main mode of transport in Mui Wo, putting in the context of the whole of Hong Kong, the practice of cycling for utilitarian purposes is residual. It is also where we can identify the alternative and even oppositional aspects to the dominant culture of ever increasing rapidity in the metropolis. Also, as mentioned earlier, the slowness as manifested in the cycling culture of Mui Wo is to be distinguished from that professed by the commodified slow movements. Following the discussions on the residual above, the slowness in both cases demonstrates some residual quality in the sense that a slower rhythm of life has been formed in the past and is still an effective element in the present culture. However, slowness is possible and affirmed as a positive value in Mui Wo, while the metropolis of Hong Kong as a whole is obsessed with speed, because the development of Mui Wo has in a number of ways been able to escape from the onset of capital. Standing apart from the logic of capital, the slowness in the practice of everyday cycling in Mui Wo poses itself as an alternative and opposition to the dominant mode of production. In contrast, the slow movements have by now largely been commodified, being incorporated in the dominant mode of production. As such, as discussed earlier, the commodified slow movements have not been able to escape from the capitalistic logic. The slowness in Mui Wo can be said to be alternative or even oppositional to the dominant culture, while the commodified slow movements are incorporated as part of the dominant culture.

If we take Harvey's notion of 'time-space compression' whereby the pace of life is ever on the rise, a slower pace is playing to its opposite, 'decompressing' time and space. And if machine technology emphasises on accelerating the pace,⁵³ taking a cue

⁵³ According to John Urry, the QWERTY keyboard of the typewriter was introduced in 1873 to slow down typists such that the typewriter keys would not jam. See John Urry, *Global Complexity* (Cambridge:

from Mauss' conception of 'body techniques' (*techniques du corps*), I will argue body technology allows us to slow down. My contention is that technologies do not take place at the level of machine only, but also at the level of the body. For Mauss, it is a mistake to think that there is technique only when there is an instrument. The body is human's first and most natural technical object and at the same time, technical means. Before instrumental techniques there is the ensemble of techniques of the body. Although equipped with a vehicle, the practice of cycling, as an embodied practice, has a certain demand for cyclist's physicality, and as we shall further see in the discussions below, the cyclist's physical manoeuvres are crucial to the practice of cycling. I would consider one's improvements in cycling techniques improvements in body techniques if the same machine and components are used.

All do not cycle in the same way, and it is interesting to see how people relate this to the place and culture in general. During my field study, I heard a lot of comments about the cycling techniques of native residents from Mui Wo and the outlying islands in general such as: 'My daughter grew up in Mui Wo, and that's why she doesn't climb on a bike like me (who is originally from town)'; 'You don't have to teach kids in Mui Wo how to ride a bike, they somehow just know how to do it'; 'He's from Peng Chau, and he can ride with only one hand grasping the handle while carrying loads of goods at the same time, and without ever crashing his bike!' In the view of Marcel Mauss, body techniques involve very important dimensions of practical reason. The body is an integral part of the self.⁵⁴ In other words, body techniques are not developed in a social vacuum, but rather are developed to serve utilitarian purposes against the specific social

Polity, 2003), 54-55. But this slowdown was not an end in itself, and was only considered necessary due to another technical feature (or constraint) of the machine.

⁵⁴ Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, 46.

backgrounds that a person finds her-/himself in. As such, the body techniques possessed by a person also form her/his subjectivity. As noted above, when a cyclist can carry loads of goods with only one hand grasping the handle, people would immediately attribute this to the fact that he is from Peng Chau.

Foucault spoke of specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves. To him, ‘technologies of the self’ (*techniques de soi*) permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁵⁵ In this sense, technologies of the self point to the positive constitution of the self. Foucault discussed such *techniques de soi* as closely related to the obligation of knowing oneself and telling the truth of oneself, which in turn is closely related to prohibition and power, for all the desires and positive feelings that can be produced in the process. ‘*J’appelle « gouvernementalité » la rencontre entre les techniques de domination exercées sur les autres et les techniques de soi*’.⁵⁶ (‘I call “governmentality” the meeting between the techniques of domination exercised on the others and the technologies of the self’, my translation), where the most general definition of *gouvernementalité* is techniques and procedures aimed at steering human behaviour (*techniques et procédures destinées à diriger la conduite des hommes*).⁵⁷

Although Foucault discussed technologies of the self as closely related to governmentality, and that governmentality is not possible without these self-

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self – A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton and Luther H. Martin (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 18.

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *Philosophie – anthologie*, établie et présentée par Arnold I. Davidson et Frédéric Gros (Paris : Gallimard, 2004), 655.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Philosophie – anthologie*, 653.

technologies which bring happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality to the self, it does not follow 'being governed' is the only destiny that the self can have. Or that governance be total at all times. I think there remains a possibility that the new self, at least under certain occasions, be used against power, and even towards self-governance. We have physical education in our school syllabus, and we are constantly reminded to keep a healthy, strong body by exercising through government-sponsored advertisements on the mass media. According to this Foucauldian view, the aim of physical education or health campaigns would be to produce a body that would serve the interests of the state. For instance, healthy bodies would allow the state to recruit a corps of physically fit police officers to enforce law and order. However, if exercises are the investment of power in the body, this more capable body will also be able to achieve higher autonomy from power exerted by the authority, including government bureaucrats and experts. I have mentioned earlier that the growth of professional expertise and machine technology has led to a de-skilling of day-to-day activity. When more is done by the experts and the machine, the average person is left with only the most mundane and simple tasks. As a result, a lot of improvements in our life have to be done by professionals, the machine or government. However, the intervention of the authority in the form of expert knowledge or government initiatives also means the intervention of power. It follows that if the average person can take matters into her/his own hands, and that s/he does not rely on experts or progress in machine technology to decide what improvements are to be made in life, s/he can also be more free from the control of power. In the case of Mui Wo residents, the investment of power in the body

pays off in the form of a higher capability to tackle narrow and winding slopes, without inviting state intervention to build wider and straighter roads.

Similarly, in *Discipline and Punish*,⁵⁸ Foucault discusses how discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile bodies’ with the body being object and target of power. Again, this power is productive – it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. In commenting this work of his own in an interview, Foucault raised the possibility of responsive actions by the ‘disciplined’:

Mastery and awareness of one’s own body can be acquired only through the effect of an investment of power in the body: gymnastics, exercises, muscle-building, nudism, glorification of the body beautiful. All of this belongs to the pathway leading to the desire of one’s own body, by way of the insistent, persistent, meticulous work of power on the bodies of children or soldiers, the healthy bodies. But once power produces this effect, there inevitably emerge the responding claims and affirmations, those of one’s own body against power, of health against the economic system, of pleasure against the moral norms of sexuality, marriage, decency. Suddenly, what had made power strong becomes used to attack it. Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counter-attack in that same body.⁵⁹

In other words, like any force that enters into a relation, actions are not one-way only but will be met by reactions, and the battle goes on. ‘For each move by one adversary, there is an answering one by the other... One has to recognise the

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon 1980), 56.

indefiniteness of the struggle – though this is not to say it won't some day have an end...'.⁶⁰

For Margaret McLaren, Foucault's account of the body as the locus of resistance can be seen as simply the logical conclusion of an argument that locates subjectivity squarely in the body.

What besides bodies can resist? It is my body that marches in demonstrations, my body that goes to the polls, my body that attends rallies, my body that boycotts, my body that strikes, my body that participates in work slowdowns, my body that engages in civil disobedience. Individual bodies are requisite for collective political action. Whether engaging in the macropolitics of collective struggle, or in the micropolitics of individual resistance, it is bodies that resist. And this resistance, like power, comes from everywhere – from social movements, from alternative discourses, from accidents and contingencies, from gaps between various ways of thinking, from gross material inequality, and from recognizable asymmetries of power.⁶¹

In view of the above, while (or precisely because) the body is the object of power, it is also in the body where resistance to power is possible. And while power tries to produce docile bodies through administering techniques of the self, such techniques can also be used against power. As discussed in the above quote by Foucault, mastery of the body can only be possible with an investment of power in the body, including gymnastics, exercises and muscle-building. Although the *intention* of power is to control

⁶⁰ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 57.

⁶¹ Margaret McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodies Subjectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 115-116.

this body, even the most totalitarian regime will not be able to control people's body – or mind for that matter – in every single aspect, and it is possible for the body to escape from power's (total) control. We may ask: how? First, no power design is 'perfect' and there may be gaps in its thinking. It is not possible for it to foresee every possible outcome. As noted by McLaren above, there are accidents and contingencies, to name just two 'unforeseeable' circumstances. Second, recall my discussions of body techniques inspired by Mauss earlier in the chapter, the body is an integral part of the self, and the body techniques possessed by a person also forms her/ his own subjectivity. This is why s/he has her/his own agency to act and react in front of power. At the same time, Mauss linked techniques to tradition, and he called technique 'an action which is *effective and traditional*... There is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition'.⁶² In other words, it is against a set of social relations and cultural backgrounds that are developed a person's body techniques. As such, while it is the intention of power to control the body through investment in the body, when it comes to the development of *concrete* body techniques, the process is not carried out in a vacuum, but rather this intention of power is met with a set of complicated social and cultural conditions, and the outcomes cannot be predicted by any power, or anyone for that matter. Techniques are socially constituted through 'education', either public or informal, or through 'imitation'.⁶³ As individuals, we enter social relations with other members of society. Power is far from the only source from which we acquire techniques. As a result, there is much room for manoeuvres on the part of each individual. For instance, where there are social inequalities and perceptions of gross injustices, individuals can very well

⁶² Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology*, trans. Ben Brewster (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 104. [original emphasis]

⁶³ Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, 45.

use their body, albeit the site of control for power, to resist against that very power in the form of protests, sabotages, etc.

In the next section, I will try to explore how, in the practice of cycling, body techniques can be used against development and power.

v. Cycling in Mui Wo

Apart from the few apartment blocks and a public housing estate situated near to the pier, Mui Wo residents are housed in about twenty villages consisting of one to three-storey detached houses. The bicycle is a main means of transport within the community, where motor vehicles are allowed only in areas around the pier and the old town. Despite the bicycle's popularity in Mui Wo nowadays, it is only a relatively recent phenomenon. Ah Fong, a lady born in Mui Wo in her mid 40s, said she only learned to ride a bicycle when she was in her mid-teens. Since the cost of a bicycle was beyond the affordability of her family, she would occasionally rent a bicycle from one of the street stalls with her friends, and that cycling was for fun rather than utilitarian. Walking was her main means of transport within Mui Wo in those days.

Mr Tsui, another indigenous resident in his mid-50s, also recalled that bicycles were expensive when he was young. His father bought a bicycle when he was about four and it was shared among the whole family. It was already a conspicuous purchase at a time when walking was the main means of transport.

Based on various residents' accounts, it was probably not until the 1980s that bicycles became more affordable and popular. Even today, at a price starting from HK\$700-800 for new ones and HK\$300-400 for second-hands, the bicycles are beyond the affordability of some residents, especially the elderly and the unemployed.

From September to November of 2009, I spoke with fourteen Mui Wo residents, and one Peng Chau resident who went to school in Mui Wo for a few years, asking them to describe their feelings and experiences of bicycling in the community. I also organised two post-screening discussions with around 20 viewers, most of whom residents, after they have watched the US bicycle documentary introduced at the beginning of this chapter. I myself have been a resident of Mui Wo since 2005 and cycling is also my main means of transport within the community. At times the discussions would include my own experiences and reflections.

My interviewees included 'indigenous' residents and 'non-indigenous' residents. Among the latter, the majority are Hong Kong Chinese who have lived in Mui Wo for different lengths of time, ranging from two years to twenty years. Three of my interviewees are Westerners who have all lived in Hong Kong for a number of years, one of whom has been a resident for sixteen years. At least two of them would fall into my definition of transnational capitalist class (TCC). They are aware of the impact brought about by TCC on the place, and would at times distance themselves from this identity, criticising the moving in of a lot of 'expats' or 'gweilos' in recent years. In terms of social conditions of my Chinese interviewees, most of them belong to the low to lower-middle income groups, while a few belong to the middle-class. The majority are tenants while a few are owner-occupiers.

Virtually all of whom I have spoken to told me they like bicycling, or made it apparent that they do - from the way they told me how they have finally succeeded in holding an umbrella while riding a bike, or how they enjoy the landscape on their bike.

To those having moved to Mui Wo from town in the first place, while being able to cycle every day is not the primary reason for their moving in, it is an added advantage.

Kristina taught at a secondary school in Hong Kong Island. She moved to Mui Wo because of the bicycle:

One of the major reasons why I moved to Mui Wo is the bicycle. Unavoidable exercise every day. I don't like to go to the gym. I can never go back to (live in) Hong Kong Island... it's difficult to have good air.

To Eric, the bicycle, though not necessarily the main reason why he moved to Mui Wo with his family, is an added attribute:

I grew up (in France) riding the bicycle to school... (The bicycle in Mui Wo...) even if not the reason, it adds up to the attractive features... lack of cars is important too.

Susan liked the fact that she can live in the countryside while not having to drive a car:

I love Lantau. I can live in the countryside without a car. I can't drive any way. In other countries, you need a car to live in the countryside.

In Hong Kong (town), it's difficult to ride a bike, people aren't aware. They think bicycles are '*lok hau*' (outmoded), '*lo toll*' (old-fashioned).

The above three interviewees are all Westerners, having resided in Mui Wo for a number of years. At least two of them can be categorized as TCC according to my definition. However, what distinguishes them from the TCC as a global class that I remain critical of in this thesis, is that in terms of transport choice, they do not use their advantageous position to impose a change on the community. Whereas one of the

critiques that I have of the TCC is that once they arrive in Mui Wo, they bring about their global, modernised way of living to the community without a due respect to what is found here already. One notable impact of the increasing presence of the TCC in Mui Wo is the introduction of many more cars; whereas these three residents consciously support the role of the bicycle as a predominant mode of transport within the community. Two of them also make it clear they support a ‘car-free’ culture.

What the above cases remind us is that there are people who really prefer cycling, with or without the possibility of driving or riding a car. To them, riding the bicycle is not a matter of being ‘captive’, but is a clear, conscious choice. This is a refutation to the link between cycling and underdevelopment.

However, we have to acknowledge things are not always straightforward. Very often in the transport discourses people who use bicycles are referred to as ‘cyclists’, while people who use cars as ‘motorists’, as if they were two separate, even antagonistic groups. But there is simply no fixed identity. Most people do both of these things and are not uniquely attached to a single mode of transport.⁶⁴ Most Mui Wo residents would take a motor vehicle when going to Hong Kong Island or to other parts of Lantau Island. Even within Mui Wo, it is not a matter of ‘either-or’ between cycling and motoring. Sometimes people have to negotiate their choices.

Gale and Simeon are a young married couple living uphill in Lung Mei Tsuen, a village with only a few, scattered households, away from all the major villages in Mui Wo. There is a narrow, steep path leading to the houses there. The couple moved there from Luk Tei Tong, a downhill, major village in Mui Wo. Every day they ride their

⁶⁴ David Skinner and Paul Rosen, ‘Hell is Other Cyclists: Rethinking Transport and Identity’, in Cox, Horton and Rosen, *Cycling and Society*, 90.

bicycle from home to the pier or old town. Simeon would then take the public bus or drive his car to work at the airport, while Gale takes the ferry to work in town. I asked them if they are obliged to ride a bike because there is no choice.

Simeon (S): It's not a matter of being captive in Mui Wo. There is no reason why we should ride a motor vehicle; this is not environment friendly.

Gale (G): You can't say it's captive. It (the bicycle) is a transport vehicle. If there were minibuses or buses running from Lung Mei Tsuen...

Question (Q): Would you prefer this way?

G: If you ask me to choose now, I'd prefer not. If there were minibuses before we moved in, I would regard this as an option, allowing me to choose between the bicycle and the minibus... when I am in a hurry, or when I have to go out for dinner, all dressed up, it may be more convenient to take the minibus than riding a bike, but I don't consider it necessary.

Q: Do you wish motor vehicles running up to Lung Mei Tsuen?

S: I do, but I wish there would be a gate down there. [Laughs] I don't want all the motor vehicles in Mui Wo coming up or parked here. I wouldn't like that. But sometimes I have to move heavy loads, or I am tired, or I stay out late... it would be nice if I can drive or take a motor vehicle up here.

Q: I don't think you can ride your bike all the way up here? I had to push my bike just now.

G: Up to the bridge at most...

S: ... most of the time to the Water Supplies Department station... we have to get off the bike around there. It takes around 20 minutes to go from the pier up here.

Q: It sounds not too bad?

S: But I would be covered with sweat...

G: But if you let me choose, I'd still prefer riding a bike.

S: Or widening up the path...

G: Yes, or widen... to me cycling provides us with daily exercise.

The couple consider it environment friendly to ride a bicycle but the topography of where they live, involving a steep and narrow path, is prohibiting, towards which the two have different attitudes. It is quite obvious that Gale accepts what the environment offers now – although at one point she was ‘guided’ by my question to say she would consider it an option if there were minibuses running uphill (a highly hypothetical proposition), she immediately thought it unnecessary. Simeon is more inclined to have machine / external technology to make life more convenient, and thus the idea of motor vehicles reaching their door can sometimes look attractive to him, especially when he is tired, or that he would think it good to widen up the path to make cycling up and down hill safer and less stressful. Gale was again ‘guided’ to say ‘yes’ to the latter idea, but before finishing the sentence, she immediately said she considered riding a bike in such difficult conditions a chance for daily exercise.

a. Body techniques

With the bicycle, improvement in techniques can bring oneself a certain state of happiness, and in this sense, a new self is constituted positively. When I asked Fannie and her daughter Sky to tell me about their cycling experiences, Fannie jumped to recount her recent breakthrough in her cycling techniques.

Fonnie (F): I would like to share my joy. I am very happy. I have been living in Mui Wo for twelve years already, and yet I had never managed to ride a bike while holding an umbrella. Yesterday (11 September 2009) was the first time I could do this. Suddenly I wanted to do this. It just happened that rain was not heavy yesterday. I felt good, and was ready to give it a try.

I steered the bike with my left hand, and held the umbrella with my right hand. It was okay when I mounted the bike. It went smoothly along the way. What worried me most was the spot at the Home Affairs Department Service Centre, where you had to turn right onto the motor-road. But it turned out to be great. There was no car at the time. I negotiated a big curve. If the curve is not abrupt, the process can be very smooth.

I have decided to use the umbrella from now on if it is not a heavy rain, it's very, very, very good.

Question (Q): Why don't you wear a raincoat?

F: It would be too hot wearing a raincoat. It is a matter of 7-8 minutes riding a bike. (With a raincoat) you have to put it on and off, and carry it with you afterwards. It is a very, very complicated thing.

Q: Do you consider this (riding a bike while holding up an umbrella) an achievement?

F: Not really... I think it's cool, with wind blowing and me carrying an umbrella.

To many residents, riding the bike in the rain is one of the bigger challenges of life in Mui Wo. Raincoats are helpful, especially those specially designed for cyclists, but at times they can be cumbersome. To some people, the bicycle raincoat can cause

problems because of the possibility of its getting stuck in the front wheel. I can share Fannie's joy because up till now I cannot manage the techniques of holding up an umbrella while riding my bicycle. I have tried, but abandoned after only a few minutes. I don't know how to negotiate a curve with only one hand on the handle and the other hand holding up an object that would fend off rain but would also run against the wind direction. Nor do I know how to change course if somebody stand in my way. So when a middle-aged mom told me she overcame all the difficulties and did it, I felt excited too. I think with more experiences and practices, one day I can do it too. To me, the prospect of relying on improvement in my body techniques in tandem with my bicycle to achieve something difficult (at least from my own perspective) sounds very attractive. Just like what Fannie felt (happiness), I would feel myself more complete (a certain state of perfection) and would consider it a self-transformation.

The new self constituted is not necessarily succumbed to power, but as a subject can lead to higher autonomy instead. When more daily needs can be satisfied using the same old bike (commuting on a rainy as well as sunny day), we do not need to have recourse to power to demand, for instance, more weatherproof facilities or wider paths. Simeon thinks it would be good to widen the path leading from their house to the old town downhill. But to Blondie, widening the path also results in poorer techniques.

Blondie first moved to Mui Wo in the early 1990s, and in those days there were only narrow paths leading to the villages inland, including Pak Ngan Heung, the village where he lives now. The path leading to the village was reconstructed as a 3 metre-road to provide access to emergency vehicles such as the ambulance in 1999. He noted:

The old paths leading to Pak Ngan Heung were narrow, demanding good techniques. Now that the paths are wider, my techniques have become poorer instead.

Ming, who is from Peng Chau and went to school in Mui Wo for a few years in the 1990s, had similar observations:

When I went to the secondary school in the 1990s, the paths leading into villages in Mui Wo were even more demanding than the one leading into Kau Tsuen now. I had a schoolmate living in Pak Ngan Heung, and the path leading to the village was a hidden slope. It was so hard for me. The topography of Mui Wo is a continuous upward slope. Now (with the new emergency access) it is a long, wide slope. But before, it was a winding, hidden incline... when I cycle up to Kau Tsuen now, I recall what I felt back then... perhaps Mui Wo people are used to it (and so they don't think it's difficult).

Obligated by circumstances, Mui Wo residents used to have an edge in cycling up narrow ascents over those from, say Peng Chau. With wider paths, one loses the incentives to better oneself in terms of body techniques. To Blondie, as time goes by, his techniques even become worse. In this way, development is like a vicious circle - once we have a wide path, if we want 'progress', we can only resort to more such paths or non-human powered vehicles, e.g. electric bicycles which are becoming increasingly popular in Mui Wo.

Nevertheless, there are attempts to resist. Yun would avoid using the wide paths as far as possible:

It used to be a small path between Luk Tei Tong and the house of Uncle Tofu Fa. During daytime now I would still insist on using the small path, and am obliged to use the new road only at night. First, I don't want to use it just because the new road was built. Second, I don't want my techniques to worsen off.

Today, with the excesses of developmentalism, this capability to use one's own body techniques to solve problems can be progressive, eroding the case for state-sponsored development.

b. The machine

I asked Ming, who is well-known for his superb bicycle techniques among his friends, whether advanced bicycle designs are important for him.

(Bicycle design) is unimportant to me. I only use cheap bicycles. First, I don't have money; second, I don't feel the need to spend a lot to buy good bicycles, as I don't even use the bicycle brakes... Why is it essential that you feet can touch the ground when seated on a bicycle? It is because the feet are your last resort in a life-saving situation. Put your feet on the ground, and the bicycle will stop.

I did not really consider the body technique of using your feet to brake as potentially 'life-saving' until I witnessed an accident whereby a young woman crashed into a street stall at the feet of a gentle slope because the brakes of her bicycle were broken. Fortunately and rather miraculously, nobody suffered any injury. Ming has long abandoned the use of his bicycle brakes – one of the reasons why the bicycle as a machine is the least important consideration in his cycling practice. As he has noted himself, economic constraints are another factor. He could not afford the more expensive bicycles, not to mention recumbent cycles. Without the means or desire to

chase after ever newer machine designs, he can do more and more with the same, old bicycle. This brings us back to Mauss' idea that before instrumental techniques, there is the ensemble of techniques of the body. According to Ming:

The so-called technique is being able to balance. The sense of balance is accumulated through experience... I started to learn to pedal at the age of 3-4. I didn't go through the stage of 'assisting wheels'. Three adults pushed behind me, and it was up to myself after that. At first I bumped into every corner, and I had fun like this for a while. At that time I was conscientious, as I didn't have to go to school or help out my father. At 5-6 am I would go and borrow the bike from my relative. I went through a number of stages to train up myself. At the request of a local TV station, I demonstrated my bicycling skills in front of the camera at the age of 7-8. When I was older, I would ride a multi-speed bike after the arrival of the 7 pm ferry when there would be a lot of people getting off at the pier. We viewed the pedestrians as 'obstacles'. At first we would hit them. After a while we became invincible. But we would not carry a pair of loudspeakers (as in the case of some other young cyclists). It was a genuine technique training, for instance we would dart onto the beach (at Tung Wan). There are two paths at Tung Wan: the upper section and the lower one. While riding along the upper section, we would dart onto the lower one... We would also speed down the slope from here (Holy Family School).

When I asked Ming if there were any more improvement in his techniques nowadays, he said:

No... I have been living in Peng Chau (where most of the houses, including Ming's, lie on flat lands). I am used to flat roads. I won't use my physical energy to delve into hill-climbing techniques.

This brings us to another of Mauss' ideas about body techniques: technique has to be effective and traditional. In this sense, technique is not a leisure or recreational sport, and is not developed for its own sake. It above all serves particular purposes. Ming grew up in Peng Chau and his techniques are related to the place. He is good at riding his bike in the midst of heavy crowds without hitting anybody, but for all his superb techniques, he is not good at riding uphill, something a Mui Wo resident would be better at - including me, who otherwise am inferior in virtually every technical aspect in comparison to Ming. I think this is the equality of body techniques, whereby everybody, regardless of class, gender and age, can participate in some way. Nobody is absolutely better in every single technique. A physically strong person is not necessarily better in terms of cycling techniques. For instance, the sense of balance is one technique, something which a physically weaker person can excel at.

c. Time-space compression

Blondie thinks the widening of path does not only represent a regression in techniques, but also a change in the sense of time:

(Apart from a regression in techniques) time has also become different. In the past (paths leading up to Kau Tsuen and Pak Ngan Heung) were very narrow. I would allow more time when I went out, because I knew there would be bicycles coming from the opposite direction any time. Now that the paths have become wider, I would only be out the door at the last minute.

In what he refers to as the concept of ‘time-space compression’, David Harvey shows as the time taken to traverse space becomes shorter, space also seems to shrink. Space is thus ‘annihilated’ through time. At the same time, time horizons shorten to a degree where the present is all there is (the world of the schizophrenic).⁶⁵ The shortening of travel time can be achieved by jet planes, high-speed trains, cars, velomobiles, etc. But I think the above observation by Blondie shows that the shortening of travel time can also be achieved by the conquest of space – by extending the coverage of concrete paths, cycling speed can be increased without a corresponding progress in techniques (or even *with* a regression in techniques). In this way, the spatial distance between Pak Ngan Heung and the pier as we perceive now, is ‘compressed’ as compared with the days before the emergency access was built, when there was only a narrow, winding path leading up to the village.

Some people prefer small paths based on aesthetic reasons. Many find the labyrinthine, complex, small paths simply more interesting and attractive. They also allow a more direct experience with nature. Ming had the following observations:

(Before the construction of the emergency access) it would take 15 minutes to ride from Pak Kung Bridge to Pak Ngan Heung... the winding, labyrinth old paths were quite pretty.

Suki missed the narrow and winding path that used to connect to her village, Luk Tei Tong:

In the past, the path leading into Luk Tei Tong was quite narrow, along which there was grass. It was only later that fences were built... it feels different now.

There is an additional layer between (me and) the nature.

⁶⁵ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 240.

Ming had a taste of how stressful time-space compression could be when he rode a motorcycle a few years ago:

The stage (when I was after) speed is gone for good. Even though I liked rapidity when I was young, I gathered speed using my own power, and did not rely on the bicycle. There are limits when you accelerate by yourself, which is different from the speed that can be attained by the bike. A few years ago I rode a motorcycle, able to reach a very high speed. It's only then I realised the downsides of high speed. Air resistance was strong, and it was hard for me. I had to make judgments and handle things in rapidity. Whether I ride a bike or motorcycle, I have to react on the road. If I ride at a high speed, I have to concentrate, because I would crash in a matter of seconds. But if I ride slowly, I can make judgment in a relaxed way. I like being relaxed, and dislike tension. I had been riding a motorbike for three years before I quit last year. First, I didn't have enough money; second, tension was a main reason too. The body would create air resistance, creating huge demand for body energy. There will be air resistance if you ride a bike at 30-40 km/h, by then it won't feel good already.

I am 30 years old now, and I like riding a small bike. I feel relaxed riding my bike slowly. In the past (when I was in my teenage) I liked pedalling rapidly past an iron gate, generating a gust of wind and sound. Now I pedal slowly, enjoying the happenings around. There is no need to be fast. Over there at Science Park, the recumbent cycle is pretty popular. What matters for recumbent riders is speed. Now speed or physical type doesn't fit me.

I want to ride a bike slowly now. It feels good, comfortable. I can go fast or slowly.

I think Ming's reflections on how difficult it is to react when speed is geared up remind us that time-space compression can be costly. Under stress, it becomes increasingly hard to react accurately to events and may cause fatal accidents. Besides, there are at least two more interesting points to note from Ming's reflections. First, as he gained his experience and wisdom, he realised faster is not always better. Slowness is also something to be enjoyed. On his bike, he can go slowly *as well as* rapidly. Second, from very early on, he does not rely on improvements in machine technology to achieve progress but on improvements in his own body techniques. In this sense, Ming has progress in both his body techniques and his self (wisdom) although he is always riding a cheap, small, old bicycle.

Indeed, we can go even further to argue that in some cases, slower *is* in itself progress. Those with some experience in cycling would know that, compared to cycling at a high speed, to keep riding a bike at a very low speed and yet without stopping altogether can be demanding in terms of techniques.

When I first asked Fun what constitutes 'good techniques' for her, her immediate answer was 'not to fall off' the bike. What worries her most is hitting a pedestrian. Before, she had to dismount a bike when the distance between her bike and a pedestrian narrowed to 1-2 feet. Sometimes she would panic, lose control of the bike and fall off. Now she can follow a pedestrian closely without hitting her or him. In the end, she figured out the key is the ability to cycle slowly:

In the past I could not ride my bike slowly. I can now. Recently, since there are more cars on the road, I prefer to ride on the path shared with pedestrians. I avoid tinkling my bell to ask them to make way. I would follow them, and would only go forward if there is enough space. To me, being able to trail behind the pedestrians is a big progress.

d. Non-linearity of progress

When ‘progress’ is non-linear, techniques do not necessarily become ever better, or remain unchanged at a certain level. At least two interviewees told me improvements in their cycling techniques cannot be sustained all the time.

Fun: On the path (where the house) of Uncle Tofu Fa (is located), there is a house with many dogs. After that there is a rusty iron net with some protruding wires. To the left are the vegetable fields. I am afraid of crashing into the rusty net, and that’s why I had to get off my bike at the beginning. Now I don’t have to get off. To me it is a technical progress. But one recent day, I was not concentrated enough. I was preoccupied with a conversation with a friend. Suddenly I was panicked. I had to get off my bike again.

While Fun’s ‘regression’ in techniques seemed to be one-off and she could attribute this quite clearly to a reason, Suki noted that her cycling techniques regress over time without any apparent causes:

My techniques are not good, and I ride my bike in a zigzag pattern. What’s more, it seems my techniques keep worsening off. For instance, I become increasingly fearful of the small path in Luk Tei Tong. I cannot turn at certain junctions, like the cycle track in front of the cooked food stalls. When I go home from the pier,

and have to turn right onto the road, I have to get off and push my bike. But curiously, when I go from home to the pier, I have no problem in turning left onto the cycle track: I feel there is a psychological barrier.

It all started three years ago when my mom moved to Mui Wo to live with me. I planned to buy a tricycle in the hope that it would be more convenient. But the fact is, I can't ride a tricycle. In the end, I started to lose my ability to turn right on my bike.

There was a time when I couldn't cross the bridge at the orchard at Tsoi Yuen Tsuen either. I think it has something to do with my psyche. Something is stuck in my heart.

Suki could not attribute her regression in techniques to any specific causes, although she knew her sudden loss in ability to turn right on her bicycle had something to do with the relationship with her mother. She also believed her inability to cross the bridge in Tsoi Yuen Tsuen was due to some unspecified 'psychological' factors.

In modern society, the reign of functionalism and rationalism has led to the division of mind and body. Suki's experience above refutes this dualism. I have mentioned earlier the work of Sennett, who suggests that there is an intimate connection between hand and head. Our body skills are directly related to subjectivity. He argues that who we are arises directly from what our bodies can do. Social consequences are also built into the structure and the functioning of the human body. The capacities that our bodies have to perform physical tasks are the same capacities we draw on in social relations.⁶⁶ Based on Sennett's argument, it follows that our social relations will also affect our ability to perform physical tasks. In Suki's case, her relations with her mother

⁶⁶ Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 290.

have affected her ability to turn right on her bicycle. ‘How did this happen?’ is a question that can only be answered by a more in-depth conversation with her and a more thorough analysis of her psychological state. But the point I want to make here is: in both Fun’s and Suki’s cases, we learn that body techniques are not as straightforward or linearly progressive as they may first seem; neither do we ‘possess’ the same techniques forever after acquiring them. They are constantly affected by the social relations and practical situations we find ourselves in. I will also argue that this ‘loss’ in Suki’s ability to turn right does not necessarily mean that her techniques have become ‘deteriorated’. It only means the situation of her embodied existence in this world is different due to a change in her relations with her mother. A hypothesis is: due to the change in the meaning she makes of this world, maybe the ability to turn right on her bike or to cross the bridge at Tsoi Yuen Tsuen has become less important or less relevant to her. With more in-depth discussions, Suki may be able to discover that while she has ‘lost’ the ability to turn right or cross the bridge, she has ‘gained’ another body technique. Finally, riding her bike every day is a repetition of her body techniques; taking a cue from Sennett’s discussions above, this repetition also enables Suki to conduct a self-dialogue with herself and thus to discover this change in her techniques, and finally to relate this change to her relations with her mother. This is only possible when time-space is not highly compressed; otherwise accidents may have already happened if everything is happening in a speedy manner.

e. Time-space ‘decompression’?

If ever shorter travel time compresses space, it follows that slowing down, i.e. a longer travel time for the same distance, can ‘decompress’ space. Hung had the following observation:

With the bicycle, I can go slow or fast, and I can sing – it would be more carefree to sing while riding a bike. Maybe I like the sense of space. If I go more slowly, people in front will be distanced away very quickly.

At a slower pace, Hung would be able to create more space for himself. Many experiences and activities that are unavailable when time-space is highly compressed become possible as the subject moves slowly through time and space. According to Lash and Urry, in the world of modernity, rapid forms of mobility (the car, train and plane) have radical effects on how people actually experience the modern world, changing both their forms of subjectivity and sociability and their aesthetic appreciation of nature and landscapes, which have come to be typically viewed as through a frame.⁶⁷

In this connection, I asked Sky, a primary five pupil whether she preferred the car or the bicycle when going home after school. ‘I like riding my bike home, because I can see the landscape on my way’, she said.

Of course one can also view the landscape by taking a car, but to the rapidly moving subject, landscape consists of a series of swiftly passing panoramas, and nature can and should be subdued, or flattened or even bypassed.⁶⁸ What I understand by Sky’s response is that she did not want to ‘bypass’ the landscape as she took her journey back home.

⁶⁷ Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, 255.

⁶⁸ Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, 255.

Similarly, Suki prefers the bicycle to walking or travelling in a car, because it is ‘faster than walking, but not too fast’ as in the case of a car. Like many Mui Wo residents, Suki has to leave home for work very early in the morning. One of the ‘rewards’ for her is to enjoy the beauty of daybreak:

I leave home (for work) at 6:45 am, as dawn breaks. It feels good as it’s a new beginning. The small paths are very poetic, as if my whole self was immersed in the morning fog. After work I would pedal slowly, leisurely and unhurriedly. I am in control of the speed; I’m autonomous. The other transport vehicles have their own speed, and it’s not up to me to decide. Also, (with the other modes of transport) there is a frame in my contact with the external world. Except when I’m going to work, I will not set a time limit when riding a bike: time is under my control.

When riding a bicycle, Suki is not confined to the ‘framed’ landscape offered by the car. Admittedly, for a fast-peddalling cyclist, landscape can as well consist of a series of swiftly passing panoramas. So the key is the ability to move in one’s own pace. To Suki, in cycling ‘at her own speed’, and feels she has her ‘autonomy’ back. This autonomy – the ability to regulate one’s own pace and route at will – seems to be crucial to many of whom I have spoken to. Hung recounted the experience he had the previous day to me:

I took the 11:30 pm fast ferry back home last night. Slowly I was pedalling back to Pak Ngan Heung. Several female foreigners were walking in front of me. I had the feeling that they were from town. One of them turned and gave a look at me. It seemed they were a bit uneasy with me trailing behind them. But the fact is, I like

to pedal slowly. (In view of their reactions) I overtook them at the spot where the tree was cut down due to the works. I even said ‘thank you’ to them. I thought to myself, why not widening up the distance... I pedalled with more force. I felt good after a few pedals. It is because I can go faster or slower. I took one breath, wanting to know how it would feel to pedal like (cycling champion) Wong Kam Po.⁶⁹ In this way, I became a ‘Wong Kam Po’ until the village entrance. It only happened yesterday. Many changes are possible, depending on my mood and strength on a given day. If I’m not in a good condition, I can pedal very slowly. I have moved to Mui Wo for five years. I have been cycling on the same path. Every day it feels different, and it is not boring. If I take the crowded ferry at 6 or 7 pm, I will let other passengers leave the cabin first. Just slow down and you can enjoy a more spacious path. Occasionally I can be off work at 3 or 4 pm. When I come back, it is still a blue sky with its white clouds. Or if I come home when it is still warm (in the winter), it feels good.

Where there is autonomy, everyday utility trips are no longer ‘mundane’. When time-space is not compressed, roads, normally perceived to be a site of danger, can accommodate users other than car drivers, including very young cyclists, who are strongly discouraged from using the road in urban areas.

When I asked Sky to describe her route from school back home, she inadvertently revealed a little secret to her mother Fannie.

Sky: I go to school in Discovery Bay. I take the bus from Discovery Bay to the pier at Nim Shue Wan... After getting back to Mui Wo, I ride my bike past the

⁶⁹ Wong Kam Po (黃金寶) is a world champion racing cyclist from Hong Kong, and is a local, popular icon for this competitive sport.

waterfront road, and then the road beside the Post Office. Sometimes I use the motor-road...

Fonnie: Did I not tell you not to ride your bike on the motor-road?

Sky: That's because I'm naughty... and then I pass the road beside the football court, and go onto the road in front of the Glasshouse, and then to Pak Kung Bridge...

This unsupervised mobility of kids is a far cry from what the culture of supervising and parenting in Hong Kong. However, reckless and speedy driving on motor roads in Hong Kong is really worrisome and poses constant danger to pedestrians and cyclists. Unfortunately, reckless and speedy drivers are making inroads into Lantau as well. As such, the worry about schoolchildren using the motor roads alone is indeed understandable. This only confirms the significance of decompressing time and space that leaves time for us to react, and space for us to get away from danger. At a time when too many people and animals die unnecessarily from the driving craze, the slow culture of Mui Wo tells us the world should and can be not like this.

f. Sensory experiences

To Justin Spinney, spaces of mobility have largely been theorised as relatively meaningless. The concept of 'place' has largely involved notions of dwelling, sociality, and the visual qualities of place embodied in the term 'landscape'. For Spinney, such thinking has been extended by Marc Augé, who characterised many contemporary spaces of mobility as 'non-places'.⁷⁰ In his work Spinney shows that in embodied practices such as cycling, notions of place are less reliant on the visual. Alongside the

⁷⁰ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London, New York: Verso, 1995).

other senses, vision is just part of a multi-sensory construction of the experiences and meanings of place.⁷¹ Here's the account by Sky:

I don't know if the dragonflies welcome me after school recently, (when I go past Pak Kung Bridge) they often follow me home. After reaching Tai Tei Tong on my bike, there is a dog called Dong Dong. Sometimes I will play with him for a while.

Sky's experiences of having a few dragonflies following her home and playing with the dog Dong Dong, involve multiple senses, including hearing, touching as well as sight and bodily interactions. Furthermore, for Sky the experience of pedalling a bicycle is itself multi-sensory. I asked her if she would prefer taking a bus home had she a choice. She said 'no':

(The bus is) stuffy. There is wind blowing when I ride a bike. I can't feel the wind inside a bus. Also, (the bike) is not as noisy as the bus. Sometimes the ads on the bus are very noisy.

Bodily feeling is important for Sky in this case. She enjoys the airstream blowing against her while riding the bicycle, and dislikes the stuffiness when sitting inside a bus compartment. The sense of hearing is crucial too, but instead of hearing a sound, it is the lack of such noise as that generated by 'Roadshow' ads on buses which makes cycling attractive for her.

For Edith, the sense of smell stands out when she cycles.

Question: Is there any section of path in Mui Wo you like in particular?

Edith: I liked the spot between Pak Kung Bridge and the 'triangular' zone. Both sides of Mrs Ng's house used to be ginger flower fields. Now they have become a

⁷¹ Justin Spinney, 'Cycling the City: Non-Place and the Sensory Construction of Meaning in a Mobile Practice', in Cox, Horton and Rosen, *Cycling and Society*, 25-46.

big hole. When there were ginger flowers, I felt like going back to an idyllic place from work. It was a cleansing of your heart. In August last year, I was too busy with my work to give the place any particular attention. Then the ginger flowers were uprooted. And then the place has become a construction site. (I like) the scents of ginger flowers... Scents are what are lacking in the city. There you want to cover yourself with a face mask instead.

In Mui Wo, you can breathe in fresh air and smell the flowers. There are different smells at different times of the day. Sometimes you can smell cow dung, but these are the smells that you would cherish. Morning air is especially fresh and you just want to take a few more gasps. During daytime of Sundays and Saturdays when I am off work, there would be the smell of sunshine. In the evening you can smell weed burning in the fields to chase away the mosquitoes. You feel that is part of life, and won't be bothered. If you live in high-rises in the city, you may smell the greasy cooking next door... it is sickening.

The ginger flower fields referred to by Edith at Pak Kung Bridge were also one of my favourite spots along my bicycle ride back home, before they were removed due to large-scale drainage works. The flower scents as well as their white blossoms render them conspicuous even to the eye and nose of the busy ones rushing in and out. This is why their absence now is very conspicuous as well. As a sort of 'consolation' to my missing the ginger flowers at Pak Kung Bridge, Fannie told me there is another ginger flower field along the road between Tai Tei Tong and Luk Tei Tong, which is 'very fragrant'.

Experienced from the alternative and embodied perspective of the bike rather than fleeting past in a car, non-place can become a place of relative interest and sanctuary.⁷² More generally, if we can just slow down our pace and use our senses, there are many places of interest around us. However, the ever faster pace of life has almost made us numb. A field of ginger flowers not ‘owned’ by anyone and without any special ‘visual qualities’, is almost destined to be seen as ‘wilderness’, as would be the case for numerous other green fields in Mui Wo or elsewhere. Development hardly spares them. I have witnessed how the long grass of a whole patch of land were uprooted by the workers of a construction site just next to it so that they have spaces to pile up the construction materials. The buffaloes who loved to rest in the mud pool, and the egrets that they always succeeded in attracting, never come back.

On the other hand, in the course of development, planners tend to build ‘landmarks’ to generate meaning of a particular place through the visual. In Mui Wo, the town square has been baptised as ‘Silver Bauhinia Square’, reminiscent of the ‘Golden Bauhinia Square’ in Wanchai. The ‘beautification’ measure at Christmas 2009 was the installation of a few bright-coloured plastic trees and a big illuminating sign that reads ‘Zhao Cai Jin Bao’ (招財進寶, or ‘Here come wealth and treasure’) along the waterfront. Two years ago, HK\$46,000 was spent by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) to install a number of large, plastic animal statues including chickens, ducks and giant ants along the footpath from the pier. Proven to be unpopular among residents, these statues suffered sabotages and ridicules shortly after their installation, and the LCSD was forced to remove all of them soon afterwards.

⁷² Spinney, ‘Cycling the City’, 33.

Despite its popularity, cycling as a daily transport mode in Mui Wo is not really recognised in the government's upcoming plan to 'revamp' the place. I have discussed in Chapter 2 how planners proposed to move the bicycle park underground under the government's plan to give a 'facelift' to Mui Wo. Proposals related to cycling include the provision and improvement of a 'cycle track network' in Mui Wo.⁷³ This sounds rather curious to many residents since they have been cycling in the community and do not see why and how there is a need to build a new 'cycle track network'. Gale disagrees with this proposal:

(The proposal) is repellent to me... it makes me think of the cycle tracks in Shatin or Tai Po. Here or there is marked as a cycle track. Everywhere is planned, and labelled. It would lose the spontaneity we have now. Now we can walk or cycle on the paths as we like. Now it is a natural thing to cycle.

(After the construction of the cycle track) it will become a scenic, touristic place, and not a community for living.

When I posed the question as to why there is a need for a new cycle track to the officer from Planning Department during his site visit to Mui Wo in February 2007, he said it was based on safety concerns, that there was a need to segregate cyclists from other road users. After some further clarifications, I have understood he was referring to holidaymakers who probably cycle once a year and who often get excited on a road where relatively few motor vehicles are to be seen. I agree there are reckless cyclists in Mui Wo just like anywhere. But to build a new cycle track for reckless cyclists, is like building a new, straighter and wider road for drink-drivers – they would just crash on the

⁷³ Civil Engineering and Development Department, "On-going projects: Project No. 7414 RO", <http://www.cedd.gov.hk/eng/projects/major/hki/hki7414ro.htm> (accessed 3 December 2008).

new road instead of the old one. In fact, the new Tung Chung Road connecting South Lantau with the new town of Tung Chung has proven itself to be no less prone to traffic accidents than the old one: the straight and wide multiple lanes of the modern highway actually invite reckless drivers to drive faster. Also, as we shall see below, the building of off-road cycle tracks can be a vicious circle: it feeds and feeds on the fear of cycling, which according to Dave Horton, is a cultural construct.⁷⁴

When viewed against Hong Kong government's official stance towards cycling, the above proposals do not really come as a surprise. Cycling is viewed as essentially a recreational sport. The use of bicycles as a transport mode is not encouraged in urban areas, although in certain new towns and 'new development areas', cycling can be used as a supplementary mode of transport. In any case, 'wherever possible, cycle traffic should be segregated from other road users'.⁷⁵

In many countries, there exist hostile official attitudes towards cycling. These include a lack of interest by engineers, who favour dealing with road and bridge design. Police often focus on the difficulties of enforcing non-motorised routes and the lack of respect of cyclists for traffic regulations. Similarly, the richer and more politically influential classes are likely to be car users and to see human-powered vehicles as 'slow-moving' and 'congesting', and they tend to have a vested interest in reducing this 'nuisance'.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Horton, 'Fear of Cycling'.

⁷⁵ Planning Department, HKSAR Government, *Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines*, http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/tech_doc/hkpsg/full/ch8/ch8_text.htm#6.cycling (accessed 29 December 2009); Secretary for Transport and Housing in written reply to a question by Fredrick Fung in Legislative Council on 30 April 2008, <http://www.thb.gov.hk/eng/legislative/transport/replies/land/2008/200805051.pdf> (accessed 29 December 2009).

⁷⁶ World Bank, *Cities on the Move*, 127.

A bias against cycle riders also exists in Hong Kong. Here is a press release on cycling safety issued by The Hong Kong Police:

Police conducted a territory-wide safe cycling campaign to raise public awareness between November 23 and December 6, 2009... Enforcement action resulted in 369 verbal warnings and the issue of 530 summonses to cyclists who committed offences... A police spokesman said that between January and November 2009 there had been 1, 649 accidents involving bicycles, 1,710 people had been injured and 8 had been killed. Cyclists on the road should comply with the road traffic legislation; offenders committing blatant cycling offences will be prosecuted.⁷⁷

What strikes me is that the police put the blame of bicycle accidents on the road entirely on cyclists, obscuring the reality that it is above all the number and speed of motor vehicles as well as motor drivers' attitudes that put bicycle riders in danger. It is highly problematic that road safety education concentrates not on the drivers of motor vehicles, but on those who they have the capacity to kill.⁷⁸

Indeed, apart from the institutional bias against utility bicycle users in a car-dominated culture, many studies have shown fear to be a significant reason of why people are reluctant to take up cycling even though they know the benefits of so doing.⁷⁹ For Dave Horton, fear of cycling is most effectively produced through constructions of cycling as a dangerous practice. Horton notes, amidst others, campaigns to promote the wearing of cycle helmets, just like road safety education, serve to construct cycling as a dangerous practice about which to be fearful. He also argues the building of 'off-road'

⁷⁷ Information Services Department, HKSAR Government, 'Road safety campaign to promote safe cycling', 7 December 2009, <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200912/07/P200912070301.htm> (Accessed 7 December 2009).

⁷⁸ Horton, 'Fear of Cycling', 138.

⁷⁹ Horton, 'Fear of Cycling'; Jeff Mapes, *Pedaling Revolution*.

cycling spaces creates the implication that cycling does not belong to the road, making the cyclist-on-the-road as ever more out-of-place. As cycling tends to be safest where there are many cyclists (and hence the term ‘Critical Mass’ as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter), and most dangerous in places with few cyclists, safety promotion and measures would actually increase the risk for cyclists.⁸⁰

In an interview with *Oriental Daily* dated 20 October 2006, Islands District Councillor Wong Fuk-kan, while praising the government’s facelift plan in Mui Wo, expressed the hope that emergency accesses can be expanded to facilitate the use of motor vehicles. A well-known Hong Kong filmmaker and critic, who no longer lives in Mui Wo but owns property there, also spoke out at a public forum on 31 May 2008, to demand the opening up of the emergency accesses to private motor vehicles. While these proposals have not been adopted so far, occasionally some drivers of private vehicles would use these accesses, making cycling on the road less safe.

According to the World Bank, biased urban transport policy unduly in favour of sacrificing the interests of pedestrians and cyclists to those of motor vehicle users constitutes a vicious policy circle. Because of this policy, non-motorised transport becomes less safe, less convenient, and less attractive, making the forecast decline of non-motorised transport in developing countries a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’.⁸¹ I think this analysis applies to the case of Mui Wo as well. With more cars on the road, the safety of pedestrians and cyclists is at stake. In addition, there are voices from drivers complaining that cyclists are jeopardising the safety of all road users. It is true that some

⁸⁰ Horton, ‘Fear of Cycling’.

⁸¹ World Bank, *Cities on the Move*, 125.

cyclists disobey traffic rules but again, the main problem lies in the number and speed of motor vehicles.

g. Human power

When I argue in this chapter that cycling should not be seen as ‘inferior’ to any other mode of transport and that it permits us to challenge the dominant model of development, the practice should not be seen as having a priority over other slower modes of transport, including walking. In many of the poorer ‘developing’ countries, only middle-income households can afford bicycles. Studies show that between 25 and 50 percent of trips in the major Indian cities, and around 50 percent of all trips in major African cities, are entirely on foot, and that trips undertaken primarily by public transport also involve significant walking distances. In medium and smaller cities, the share of all-walking trips increases to 60 to 70 percent.⁸² Again, while ‘poor’ countries are characterised by a higher proportion of trips made by walking (in the UK, for instance, 69% of commuting trips are made by car and only 11% are made on foot⁸³), cycling should not be considered as technologically ‘more advanced’ as compared to walking. Indeed, pedestrians and cyclists share many common objectives when it comes to urban planning – both forms of transport have been marginalised at the expense of motor vehicles.⁸⁴ Compared to cycling, the activity of walking, even slower and without the employment of any instrument, seems even more marginalised in the development discourse. Many people in Mui Wo walk. They are most notably the elderly, small kids, and people who do not know how to ride a bike or who simply prefer walking to cycling.

⁸² World Bank, *Cities on the Move*, 126.

⁸³ UK Department for Transport, *National Travel Survey, 2005*. Quoted in <http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/news/uk/useful-facts/> (accessed 1 January 2010).

⁸⁴ Living Streets, ‘Pedestrians and cyclists: a new briefing’, <http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/news/uk/-/pedestrians-and-cyclists-a-new-briefing> (accessed 1 January 2010).

I have discussed earlier that cycling allows us to generate meanings in non-places due to its relatively low speed. However, for some people the speed of bicycles is already too high for any meaningful exchanges on the interpersonal level. Fannie would prefer walking in this case: 'One drawback with the bicycle is that we fleet past people too quickly... if we walk, we can have time for communications with others.' Indeed, when one who usually cycles gives up her/ his bicycle for once and walks in Mui Wo, other residents would also perceive that s/he is not in a hurry and is ready for a chat. In this case, it will be easier to start a conversation. While I can recognise the face of a lot of residents in my own village and we would nod to each other while riding on our bicycle, I almost always start to speak to someone when we both walk, and the conversation usually starts with the question: 'Where is your bike?'. This experience with walking further shows that slowing down remains a pre-requisite for meaningful exchanges between people.

Chapter 5 All roads lead to development, or how small paths lead us home

i. *The Road*

I would like to begin this chapter by quoting a passage from an English-language novel entitled *The Road*, which was first published in 1959:

‘With our population problem, it seems so baffling that we have all this wasted, empty land on islands like this, and nobody willing or able to use it.’

Freddie turned slightly, sensing Sylvia’s return. His rough, silver hair seemed to catch the sparkles thrown up by the water as the launch gently came to a halt. But as he courteously rose and brought up another of the comfortless chairs for her, Sylvia noticed that their eyes were far from meeting. He was absorbed in the conversation. Before she was even fully seated, he was turning back to Richard and saying, as he leant forward for matches to re-light his pipe:

‘There’s only one thing to do with an island of this kind.’

‘What is that, sir?’ asked Richard.

Freddie re-lit his pipe, placing a matchbox on top of the bowl while he made it draw.

‘Build a road on it,’ he said briefly.

Richard frowned slightly; the Webbs visibly drew back in their chairs at such an unusual idea.

‘A road?’ exclaimed Mrs. Webb, with the faint suggestion of a titter – the titter of contempt used so often among the wives of technical officers when discussing the madcap notions of administrators.

‘What kind of a road?’ asked Webb.

‘Any kind you like,’ replied Freddie, with, on his side, a faint suggestion of the urbanity which would have so markedly developed in his character had he chosen a career in London instead of in the colonial civil service. ‘But the larger the better,’ he added, smacking the box of matches down on the wicker table.

‘The larger the better? But who would use it?’ asked the thick-set Webb, genuinely puzzled.

‘Yes, who would use it?’ echoed his wife. ‘Almost no one lives on the island.’ Leaning forward again for the matches, and with a turn of the head that he often used when dismissing a remark – and the person who made it – Freddie replied only to the husband.

‘There is never the slightest point, Webb, in asking who will use a road. Roads are the beginning of all development. Build a road, and everything else will follow.’¹

The island in question, Great Island, was reminiscent of Lantau Island. The protagonists, all belonging to the small circle of ruling elites in colonial Hong Kong, were conversing at a launch picnic. Freddie, who suggested building a road on the island, was Acting Governor. Sylvia, a novelist, was married to Richard, the District Officer (or the ‘Magistrate’ as the country people in the novel would call him) of the islands, including Great Island and Small Island, a place reminiscent of Cheung Chau. Mr Webb was Deputy Director of Public Works.

The author of the novel, Austin Coates, served as a senior government official in the British colony of Hong Kong after the Second World War. In his Foreword to the 1987 edition of the novel, Coates wrote that the road in question was a road which has ‘figured in my own life’. According to his own account, in the seven years between 1949

¹ Coates, *The Road*, 15-16.

and 1956, he was a civil administrator and magistrate in the British administration of Hong Kong. For some of this time he was in charge of the Southern District, which consisted of Tsuen Wan, Sai Kung, parts of Kowloon and nearly all the islands except for Hong Kong itself, and had a total population of about 250,000. Like most of the district, Lantau Island, the largest of the islands, was roadless back in those days. During the five summer months when the prevailing wind blows from the south, it was virtually impossible to put a boat out to sea along the southern coast of Lantau. At that time several villages lay along this coast. Cheung Chau, where there was a hospital, could be viewed in the distance. In other words, during these five months Lantau villagers could not get their sick to hospital. ‘The vision of being sick in one of those villages during the summer – the time of sickness – haunted me as being something peculiarly dreadful. I decided to build a road’, wrote the author.² Of course, this is the view held by a British colonial officer. To the local inhabitant who was more familiar with Chinese medicine at that time, the importance of a hospital offering Western medical treatment remains doubtful.

According to the design of Coates, the road would lead along the coast, linking all the villages, and then, running over a ‘frighteningly steep piece of mountain’, reach Silvermine Bay at the eastern end of the island.³ From Silvermine Bay there was a regular ferry service to Cheung Chau where the hospital was found. However, what originally was intended for transporting the sick quickly evolved into something else.

² Coates, *The Road*, 1-2.

³ Coates, *The Road*, 2. This ‘frightening steep piece of mountain’ might be referring to the section of road linking South Lantau and Tung Chung in the north which is known for its difficult and rough terrain. To reach Silvermine Bay from Shek Pik Reservoir, in theory (at least by today’s viewpoint) one does not have to go through the detour to Tung Chung. In other words, Coates might have mixed up the two sections of road, or this detour was due to the design of the road in those days.

This happened even before the road was built. In Coates' account, he was posted to Sarawak, today part of East Malaysia, and did not see the road being built. He had left the road as a completely designed and budgeted scheme approved by the Government, but the finance branch thought of 'every possible reason to stop it being built'. Subsequently, the government decided a new reservoir was urgently needed to solve the water crisis in urban Hong Kong and Kowloon areas. Shek Pik, the village to which Coates's road design led, was going to be the site of this huge reservoir.⁴ This reservoir was built at the expense of the livelihood of paddy field farmers across Lantau Island, depriving them of the water much needed to irrigate their fields. According to an account by a US geographer doing his fieldwork in south Lantau at that time:

The Shek Pik water catchments are already tapping streams that normally flow into padi [paddy] fields below. In the southern half of Tai Yu Shan [i.e. Lantau Island] the allocation of water to padi fields is at the discretion of the Water Engineer... Padi cultivators complain that they are receiving insufficient water, that water must circulate freely in padi fields if they are to yield a good harvest, and that the Water Engineer does not fully understand the needs of padi farmers. The Water Engineer's position is that the farmers are being selfish, that the needs of the majority of the urban people of Hong Kong and Kowloon must take precedence over the needs of the villagers of Tai Yu Shan and that Progress will eventually help the villagers.⁵

⁴ Coates, *The Road*, 2.

⁵ Armando da Silva, *Tai Yu Shan; Traditional Ecological Adaptation in a South Chinese Island* (Taipei: Orient Cultural Service, 1972), 89.

The 1950s was the time when Hong Kong experienced the dual process of industrialisation-urbanisation. The interests of urban areas in Hong Kong and Kowloon were privileged, even if they came at the expense of Lantau and the New Territories at large. When rural residents protested against practices imposed by the Hong Kong government (as represented by the Water Engineer in the above case) in defence of their own livelihood, they were accused of being ‘selfish’, which is a strongly value-laden word, by the authorities who spoke from the position of the ‘majority’, taking the moral high ground. Development and progress were presented as universal, that these would eventually help the villagers. However, in some cases entire villages are uprooted, meaning villagers are going to lose their home and livelihood forever.

In the novel by Coates, the two villages of ‘Sheung Tsuen’ and ‘Ha Tsuen’ were going to be submerged by water collected behind the dam. Villagers refused to relocate to a village designated by the government. There was an episode in which the villagers confronted the District Officer, Richard:

‘This is not a police matter. This is between us. I’ve come to tell you you’ve got to move. The water will not reach the village for several weeks, but in your own interests you should move now to the new village. Everything is ready for you up there. It’s a good place.’

Old Chan gave a contemptuous grunt and looked down the line of his men.

‘We are not going to move there.’

‘Have any of you been up to see what’s been done?’ Richard asked, stepping down into the dry rice-field, where he stood head and shoulders below them.

‘We’re not interested.’

‘What are you interested in?’

Old Chan nodded towards the dam.

‘We want this work to stop.’

‘It can’t stop. The city has to have water.’⁶

In the end, after some negotiation tactics and attempts to break up the village into sections, the District Officer succeeded in cheating the villagers into moving their village:

They would eventually move in peace. Richard had succeeded in cheating them.

Up the hill, he was leading them to their certain ruin as a community. He felt silently exhilarated, like a merchant after selling for a high price a valuable-looking fake. His cheat had succeeded.⁷

According to Coates the author, once the road was connected with the reservoir, government money arrived quickly. There must be a road from Silvermine Bay to convey the cement mixers and other heavy equipment to the reservoir site. The finance branch was ordered to find money immediately and work began and very soon.

The road, it had to be admitted, was a sensational local success, fulfilling its designed purpose. Yet its nature had entirely changed from anything originally contemplated. It was this that intrigued me; that an inanimate design, still no more than a drawing on paper, can change in its nature, becoming something quite other, yet remaining the same.⁸

In another time and another place, a well-known development example related to the road is undoubtedly the case of Paris in the nineteenth century, when Georges

⁶ Coates, *The Road*, 252.

⁷ Coates, *The Road*, 256.

⁸ Coates, *The Road*, 2.

Eugène Haussmann, the Prefect of Paris and its environs, with the mandate of Napoleon III, built an extended network of boulevards through the heart of the old medieval city. According to the account by Marshall Berman, the boulevards would enable traffic to flow through the centre of the city and to move straight ahead from end to end. This was something unimaginable before in the city of Paris. The boulevards would also clear up slums and open up ‘breathing space’ in a polluted and congested city. They would stimulate business expansion and create mass employment. As local businesses would be created and expanded at all levels, the municipal costs of demolition, compensation and construction could be saved. Finally, the boulevards would create long and broad corridors in which troops and artillery could be deployed effectively against barricades and popular insurrections. Berman further notes that the boulevards were only part of a comprehensive system of urban planning that included central markets, bridges, sewers, water supply, the Opéra and other cultural palaces. In the words of Robert Moses, urban planner and master builder of New York in the twentieth century, Haussmann ‘grasped the problem of step-by-step large-scale city modernisation’. At the same time, the new construction demolished hundreds of buildings, displaced thousands of people and destroyed whole neighbourhoods that had lived for centuries.⁹ In other words, the building and widening of roads are the beginning of modern, capitalistic development in Paris, and reflect the State’s conceptualisation of how the city should be like – of course, as we shall see further below, when capital starts to penetrate space, development would also follow the logic of capital which is not necessarily within the control of the state.

Road development was also pivotal on the agenda of the Hong Kong British Administration in the post-war economic development of the territory. I have noted in

⁹ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 150.

Chapter 1 that since the early colonial days, roads and streets were built as a means to open up new developable sites.¹⁰ In a work entitled *Ways to Urbanisation – Post-War Road Development in Hong Kong* that looks much like an official account celebrating the government's efforts in constructing a comprehensive transport network in the city, Pui-yin Ho charts the historical development of roads in Hong Kong in a chronological manner after the Second World War and shows how it was intimately related to the overall economic development of Hong Kong. The post-war road development is divided into three periods. The first period concerns the development and expansion of roads and land reclamation in Hong Kong between 1946 and 1966, when the territory saw a rapid increase in its population. At that time, road development mainly concentrated along the two sides of Victoria Harbour, where most of the business activity took place. The second period refers to the development of a long-term strategy related to road development within the colonial government from 1966 to 1986. It was a time when Hong Kong experienced rapid economic growth. The author notes that it was also a time when mass transport systems were constructed by the government to develop new terrains in Hong Kong, including the New Territories that is linked to the Mainland geographically. There was an awareness to establish transport links within the region. Finally, the period between 1986 and 2007 is qualified by the author as the establishment of Hong Kong as an 'international metropolis'. The author begins this section with the discussions on the setting up of Highways Department within the government structure in 1986 in response to the increase in major road projects. The period was also marked by a series of 'centennial constructions', including highways that connect Shenzhen and Hong Kong, and a series of highways and bridges that

¹⁰ Nissim, *Land Administration and Practice in Hong Kong*, 11.

facilitate the connection between core urban districts and the Hong Kong International Airport in northern Lantau Island.¹¹

The author stresses the important role played by roads in urban development: Roads are the blood vessels of a city and their proper management is conducive to the development of transport and the city... For a modern city, road facilities are not just the basis for the city's development; they can also raise the work efficiency of various industries and shorten distances between places. Roads enable us to make the most out of the precious time that we have and are a portrait of the city's unique qualities.¹²

In the beginning of the book, Ho, without much elaboration, juxtaposes Paris and Guangzhou in the mid-nineteenth century, implying that the rise of Paris in that period was due to Haussmann's road projects, while Guangzhou's decline as the only Chinese city open to foreign trade between 1522 and 1842 was due to the defeat of China in the Opium War. This awkward, brief discussion of the decline of Guangzhou in about 100 words seems to serve only one purpose: opening the way to chart the successful development of Hong Kong as a port city open to the world, in contrast to the 'closed-door policy' of China towards western countries at that time, ever since British troops took over the territory after the Opium War.¹³ In Ho's account, Hong Kong owed its success not only to a good transport network, but also to the connection of this network with external transport links such as railways and piers. This view is followed through in

¹¹ Pui-yin Ho, *Ways to Urbanisation – Post-war Road Development in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

¹² Ho, *Ways to Urbanisation*, 320.

¹³ Ho, *Ways to Urbanisation*, 1.

the book, with the 'Integration with Pearl River Delta' lying at the end of the author's chronological storyline.

For one thing, the book offers a rich database of the historical development of roads in Hong Kong. It also offers some important hints about the rationale behind road development in the city since the colonial days. For instance, it traces the first large-scale reclamation and road construction project undertaken by the government in the wake of a fire breaking out at Lower Bazaar (present-day Jervois Street) on 28 December 1851. In the subsequent year, the Hong Kong government decided to reclaim and build Bonham Strand to meet the development needs of the city. Between 1889 and 1903, new reclamation works were carried out by the government by extending northwards into the harbour.¹⁴

In 1941, the Hong Kong government invited British consultant David J. Owen to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the role that Hong Kong played as a transport hub in the Asia-Pacific region and the future development of the port. In his report, Owen suggested the government to concentrate the development of its road network in core areas like Central, Wanchai and Tsimshatsui, where traffic was most dense. Since developable space was scarce in these areas, reclamation should be carried out to solve the problem of land shortage in the urban centre.¹⁵ Ho does not explain why reclamation, according to Owen, was a logical solution to the shortage of land in dense urban areas. The author has just accepted what Owen said in his report, i.e. road development should solve the prevailing problem of congestion. If solving congestion were truly the concern, decentralisation should also come as a logical solution – if core business and trade

¹⁴ Ho, *Ways to Urbanisation*, 14.

¹⁵ Ho, *Ways to Urbanisation*, 30-36.

activity can be diverted to less congested areas through land planning, making dense areas less busy, traffic congestion can also be eased.

In view of the above, I think Ho's analysis misses one important point: road development is intimately related to the production of space and thus to the generation of surplus value out of space. I have discussed in Chapter 1 that under finance capitalism, land and space, from being the background of commodity production, have become product themselves. State-capitalistic development is the process of rendering space homogeneous and exchangeable in the market, such that it is endowed with exchange value. Now a product, homogeneous and abstract space becomes profitable for the capitalist, who tries to extract the maximum surplus value possible out of it. With the British colonial administration of Hong Kong earning most of its incomes from land sales, it had a significant interest in maximising the exchange value of space and so this making of space as product started very early in the development of Hong Kong, long before capitalism has entered its present financialisation stage. This double effect of land policy dating from the colonial days and finance capitalism explains why property speculation is so frantic in Hong Kong today.

Without the reclamation projects in the twentieth century to develop roads along the northern coast of Hong Kong Island, or the southern side of Victoria Harbour, the ability to generate income for the government – or ultimately the surplus value for the capitalist – out of space in the Central Business District (CBD) running from Central to Wanchai, would be greatly limited. The scenario remains similar after 1997, with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government earning a huge part of its incomes from land sales. Without the controversial Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong

Express Rail Link (XRL) in the twenty-first century, the ability for West Kowloon, the new CBD lying at the northern coast of Victoria Harbour, to generate surplus value will be significantly reduced.

In her book, Ho offers a very positive account about the government's intentions in the development of roads and they seem to be clear and well-defined. However, when capital penetrates space, the logic of capital, always in search of the maximum surplus value, sometimes escapes the calculations of the government. In the novel *The Road*, once the news that a road connecting Wireless Bay, reminiscent of Silvermine Bay, and Sheung Tsuen, reached the ears of a local businessman, Wong Tak-wor, through a corrupted interpreter of the District Office, the former acquired rice fields lying along the proposed road from poor farmers at a low price, so as to reap fat profits from the development that was set to follow.¹⁶

In a letter written from the District Officer to his wife Sylvia, he bemoaned: 'A housing scheme which I had recommended at Long Sands, on the route of the road, has become a goldmine for speculators'.¹⁷ While I remain sceptical about the government's innocence in its intentions which is implied in Coates's description of the District Officer's agony here, it is true that capital follows a logic that is often unforeseen by the best calculations of the government – or by any government agent for that matter.

I think it is reasonable to assume that by 'Long Sands', the author was getting his inspiration from Cheung Sha (長沙 which literally means 'Long Sands') on the southern coast of Lantau Island. It has a long, beautiful sandy beach, and is home to some of the

¹⁶ Coates, *The Road*, 124-131.

¹⁷ Coates, *The Road*, 203.

most luxurious villas on Lantau. The development of Cheung Sha in the present days is also intimately related to a road – Tung Chung Road.

ii. The Road to Development

The new Tung Chung Road (TCR) was completed in 2008 and fully opened to traffic in 2009. TCR is the only vehicular access connecting North and South Lantau, between Tung Chung in the north and Cheung Sha in the south. Originally it was a 3.5 metre wide single-lane carriageway with about 40 passing bays for two-way traffic.¹⁸ As South Lantau has always been designated as a ‘conservation area’¹⁹ by the government, since the 1970s, roads on South Lantau are subject to a 24-hour restriction of road closure. All motor vehicles are banned from using the roads there, unless they have the ‘Lantau Closed Road Permit’. Moreover, in view of the limited capacity of the old TCR, a dual permit system was in place. In effect, only franchised buses, Lantau taxis and vehicles with the TCR Prohibited Zone Permit are allowed to use Tung Chung Road 24 hours a day. Other vehicles with the ‘Lantau Closed Road Permit’ only, including those owned by residents of South Lantau, cannot use the road from 8 am to 6 pm.²⁰ In effect, it was to discourage residents from relying on private cars as their main means of transport.

¹⁸ Legislative Council Secretariat, ‘Background Brief on Improvement to Tung Chung Road between Lung Tseng Tau and Cheung Sha’, Legislative Council, 11 December 2006, <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr06-07/english/panels/tp/papers/tp1215cb1-463-e.pdf> (accessed 25 June 2012).

¹⁹ According to the Nature Conservation Policy of the Hong Kong SAR Government, to maintain the biodiversity in the area, South Lantau is one of the 24 Country Parks that are subject to stringent planning and development controls under conservation zonings on statutory town plans. See Environmental Protection Department, ‘Conservation’, http://www.epd.gov.hk/epd/textonly/english/environmentinhk/conservation/conservation_maincontent.html (accessed 21 September 2012).

²⁰ Transport and Housing Bureau, Transport Department, ‘Road Access Restrictions on South Lantau Including Tung Chung Road’, Legislative Council Panel on Transport, March 2008, <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr07-08/english/panels/tp/papers/tp0401cb1-1125-5-e.pdf> (accessed 25 June 2012).

Widening works on TCR began in mid 2004 and completed in late 2008. TCR is now a 7.3 metre wide two-lane road for two-way traffic. In view of the increase in road capacity, the Transport and Housing Bureau and Transport Department had considered relaxing restrictions on the use of TCR. To this end, they had consulted the views of Legislative Council members, District Council members, green groups, residents and local groups but they did not specify the names of such groups. As for the views of these parties, in the paper presented to the Legislative Council, it is stated that some 'indicate that the status quo should be maintained so as to protect the South Lantau conservation area; some prefer a phased relaxation of the current traffic control; and some advocate a total lift of the existing traffic control.' In particular, the green groups object to the full opening of TCR on the grounds that it might damage the environment of South Lantau. While these groups generally support the round-the-clock use of TCR by residents and business operators, they are also concerned that this measure would encourage more people to move to Lantau and more residents to buy private cars. Some agricultural lands may be converted into residential purposes or used for illegal parking. In the end, the government decided to relax the restrictions to allow vehicles of residents and business operators to use the new TCR 24 hours a day.²¹

Indeed, the concerns expressed by the above green groups proved to be premonitory. The effects of the widened Tung Chung Road on the local traffic scene and property market have been remarkable. In Chapter 1, I have discussed a television documentary pronouncing the 'death' of Mui Wo, South Lantau. I have argued that according to such analysis, whether 'alive' or 'dead', the parameter of Mui Wo's well-

²¹ Transport and Housing Bureau, Transport Department, 'Road Access Restrictions on South Lantau Including Tung Chung Road'.

being or ill-being is property prices. Mui Wo was declared ‘dead’ by the televised journal in August 2006 because rentals (mainly that of retail and holiday homes) and the number of visitors were not up to the levels expected or desired by certain sectors. Barely six years have passed. The property market, especially the residential market in Cheung Sha and South Lantau at large is booming, largely due to the opening of the new road.

When the government launched two plots of residential land in Cheung Sha for sale by tender in November 2011, the executive director of Tai Cheung Holdings, one of the bidding developers, said in a newspaper interview that they were interested in the tender as the roads of Lantau have been improved and the site is in proximity to the airport. They intended to build 14 to 16 villas of 2,000 sq ft each. The two land tenders attracted five and four bidders respectively. According to the same press report, the abovementioned developer was also interested in buying another plot of land in Mui Wo, the tender of which attracted two bidders.²² To this developer, the residential land is not land for living as such, but a product that will be able to generate profit for him. Moreover, based on the consideration of this developer – road access and proximity to the airport, the land is a nodal point within an extensive network that has the potential to generate profit and other advantages for this developer and the potential buyers of the villas, who are likely to belong to the capitalist class themselves (I will return to this discussion later). The more the villa buyers can potentially gain from the spatial advantages of this plot of land, the more they are willing to pay and hence the higher the profit for the developer.

²² *Sing Tao Daily*, 25 November 2011.

I have noted in Chapter 4 that money has no meaning independent of time and space. In consequence, it is always possible to pursue profit and other forms of advantage by altering the ways time and space are used. The time of production and the time of circulation of exchange make up the concept of ‘the turnover time of capital’. The faster the capital launched into circulation can be recuperated, the greater the profit will be. There is always an incentive for capitalists to accelerate their turnover time in comparison with the social average, and in such process to promote a social trend towards faster average turnover times. Capitalism has for this reason been characterised by continuous efforts to shorten turnover times, thereby shortening social processes while reducing the time horizons of meaningful decision-making. Overall speaking, capitalist modernisation is very much about speed-up and acceleration in the pace of economic processes and hence in social life.²³

Here I would like to extend the above discussion by incorporating the notion of ‘transnational capitalist class’ (TCC). Under the definition of TCC by Leslie Sklair, the ‘capitalist class’ constitutes not only those who actually own the means of production, but also those with ownership and control of other types of capital, notably political, organisational, cultural, and knowledge capital. Only by adding the ownership and control of such kinds of capital to that of money capital, he believes, can the globalisation of capitalism be adequately understood.²⁴

As more people of the transnational capitalist class move to the community of Mui Wo, they also bring in their modern lifestyle. With their monetary, political, organisational, cultural, and knowledge capital, they have the power to drive

²³ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 229-230.

²⁴ Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class*, 4.

development in the community towards a direction that is characterised by capitalist modernisation, efficiency, scientific rationality, cleanliness, etc.

Like all capitalists in the ‘traditional’ sense, this transnational capitalist class will be able to maximise their capital accumulation if time and space are organised in such a way that the capital – knowledge, social, cultural, political alike – they put into circulation can be recuperated in a speedy and efficient way. They have an interest in compressing time through conquering space, like the construction of more and wider roads, and more facilities that will enable them to make use of these conquered spaces. Typical village paths measure just over one metre wide and the majority of the villages in Mui Wo are closed to motor vehicles. At consultation forums held by the government to solicit public views on the plan to revamp Mui Wo, there are constantly voices from people of this class to call for more parking spaces and the opening up of the emergency accesses to private vehicles. There are also repeatedly calls upon the government to build more emergency accesses in Mui Wo. Such emergency accesses have been built wide enough for ambulances, fire engines and police cars to pass through in case of emergency, but once they are built, some residents apparently feel the right to drive their motor vehicles on them despite the restriction. One luxurious villa located inside a zone closed to motor vehicles and owned by a designer of European origin even has a garage built adjacent to the house. Roads are the beginning of all development. Once there is a road, there will be calls to open up the accesses to other vehicles, including private cars of residents.

Until now, this demand of opening up the emergency accesses to general traffic has not been met. However, the eventuality of relaxation of the restrictions is already

able to trigger off hopes for reaping future profits for the capitalist-developer. Indeed, risk-taking is a prominent feature of the capitalist and s/he is more than willing to take it since the higher the risk is, the higher the potential profit will be. One of the newest emergency accesses in Mui Wo lies in the village of Luk Tei Tong. Along the road, there are a number of newly built luxurious villas.

With improved roads, cars have become a more common scene in South Lantau – along South Lantau Road, the artery running from Mui Wo in the east to Shek Pik in the west, passing through Nam Shan, Pui O, San Shek Wan, Cheung Sha, Tong Fuk and Shui Hau, where clusters of houses are located. Some of them are luxurious villas. While in principle, every residential unit or business operator is issued with one Lantau Closed Road Permit only,²⁵ certain households have somehow managed to own more than one motor vehicle. Carmen, a resident who has lived in Nam Shan for 7 years and drives regularly to do her shopping in Mui Wo told me when she first moved to South Lantau in 2005, there were not as many cars on the road as today. Moreover, most of the private vehicles that she saw in those days were inexpensive models and ‘shabby’. Nowadays, she noted it is obvious that there are many more cars and more expensive models. As she was saying this, she pointed to a BMW passing before us near the pier of Mui Wo. ‘It is now more difficult to find a parking space when I shop in Mui Wo,’ she continued. She also recalled that previously, she seldom saw other cars approaching when she drove onto South Lantau Road from her home’s driveway in Nam Shan; now, more often than not, there are cars coming when she makes the exit from home.

²⁵ Transport and Housing Bureau, Transport Department, ‘Road Access Restrictions on South Lantau Including Tung Chung Road’.

As a cyclist using the motor roads in Mui Wo, I share Carmen's observations. When I first moved to Mui Wo, also in 2005, I encountered motor vehicles just once in a while on my way. I felt relatively safe riding my bicycle on the motor road. However, since two or three years ago, motor vehicles have been a constant scene on the portion of the motor road that I have to pass through when riding my bicycle from home to the pier. I feel insecure with private cars, trucks and buses circulating on the road, sometimes speeding by my bicycle at a close distance. At the same time, as a pedestrian I also find that many more cars are now parked on the pavements, obstructing access, apparently because parking spaces can no longer accommodate the number of motor vehicles circulating in Mui Wo. Sometimes I am obliged to go off the pavement and walk on the motor roads. I have discussed in Chapter 4 that a biased transport policy in favour of motor vehicles will create a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the safety of cyclists and pedestrians is jeopardised by the increasing number of cars, cycling and walking will not fail to become more dangerous. This perceived danger will in turn drive cyclists off the motor roads. I have also discussed in the last chapter that cycling tends to be safest when there is a large number of cyclists on the road. As such, the decrease in the number of cyclists because of the perceived danger makes it more dangerous for those bicycle riders who remain on the road. Cycling as a mode of transport is thus marginalised on the motor roads.

iii. From wider roads to more expensive housing

In discussing the hikes in rentals and prices of housing, Blondie, a resident of Mui Wo for almost twenty years, said that he thought the new Tung Chung Road was a major force behind the surge in demand for housing in South Lantau. According to his

observation, a lot of new residents of ‘foreign origin’ like to drive their private car. He noted that many more parking lots have been built in Pui O, another major residential area in South Lantau which is fully accessible by motor vehicles, to accommodate the demand for parking spaces. Besides, these residents prefer to buy the three-storey village houses *en-bloc*, whereas previously, one household usually occupied one floor only. This creates a strong demand for houses. Notably, many more luxurious villas have been built in Pui O. This is the reason why Blondie has noted the proliferation of parking lots there.

It is reasonable to attribute the above observations made by Blondie and Carmen (more cars and more expensive models, and bigger houses) to the increasing presence of the transnational capitalist class in South Lantau over the past few years, whose monetary power is very strong. The increase in demand for bigger houses from this class of residents creates a corresponding shortage in supply. This generates a rippling effect to affect more remote areas which are not connected to big roads. In June 2012, my landlord managed to strike a deal to lease the top floor unit of our three-storey house for a monthly rent of HK\$8,500, an all-time high for our village. In comparison with the median monthly domestic income of HK\$10,500 or the median monthly domestic rent of HK\$2,000 in Mui Wo,²⁶ these jumps in prices are simply beyond the affordability of the average resident. However, even at this high price, my landlord had at least two tenants to choose from. He was very excited after striking the deal with the new tenant and invited me to come up to the flat and rooftop that he had just rented out, from where one can command a nice view of the Silvermine Bay and even the southern coast of

²⁶ 2006 Population By-census Office, Census and Statistics Department, ‘Working population by industry (sector) and monthly income from main employment, 2006’, <http://www.bycensus2006.gov.hk/en/data/data3/index.htm> (accessed 1 May 2010).

Hong Kong Island. He said the couple made the decision once they saw this view. It was the first time he rented out his top floor unit in more than twenty years, as he had always kept it for his own use on weekends and holidays. He said the new tenant did not even negotiate the rent and he regretted for not asking for a higher price in the first place. The new tenant owns a business in Kowloon and used to live in their owner-occupied house in Luk Tei Tong, a major village of Mui Wo which is connected to other parts of Mui Wo by wide emergency accesses. Recently, like a number of landlords in Luk Tei Tong, they sold their own house, riding on the latest property market boom.

To the small community of Mui Wo with approximately 5,000 people with modest means, such increases in rents, however small in absolute numbers, are capable of creating a notable impact on the community. In Kau Tsuen, the village where I am living, at least two families moved here at the end of 2011 and early 2012 from the village of Tai Tei Tong because their original landlords sold their houses. Tai Tei Tong is connected with other parts of Mui Wo and the pier by 3-metre wide accesses. One of the families moved to the flat next door to me which had been left vacant for more than one year. The man, a middle-aged Englishman who decorates houses for a living, told me he had been living in Mui Wo since the 1990s and recently he found it difficult to find a house to rent. 'Everybody is buying', he said. Paradoxically, as more people are buying houses and many of them are English-speaking, he has been getting more jobs in recent months. His kids do not like the flat because it is 'too far'. 'None of my friends will come here to visit me,' complained Mike, a Primary Six pupil at Mui Wo School, to his mother after visiting the flat for the first time. This complaint is related to the road. Kau Tsuen is one of the farthest villages from the pier and the old town centre. In

addition to its remote location, unlike other major villages which are accessible by wide emergency accesses, it is connected to other parts of Mui Wo by a small and winding uphill path only. To ride on a bicycle to reach the village demands physical strength and techniques. It can be quite disagreeable to do so on hot summer days.

The family has taken up the flat for a monthly rent of HK\$5,000, a new high for ground floor units in the village at that time. The flat was very dirty and full of rubbish when the family moved in, and they had to clean it up themselves. Increasingly, it is a seller's market as more people with high spending power are moving to Mui Wo; vacant flats at affordable rents are becoming increasingly rare. Not only tenants have to pay a higher rent, but they have less negotiation power. Some landlords have adopted an attitude of 'accept it or leave it', as they believe they can find a tenant anyway.

A side effect of rising rents is that tenants are somehow 'forced' to move to any place available, especially for those tenants who are less advantaged financially. They may not necessarily like the place and may lack the initiative to take care of its environment. I have noted above that the kids of my neighbour think their house is too far away from their friends'. Their mother also finds that the village full of mosquitoes, because 'there is a lot of grass'. Tai Tei Tong, the village where the family had been living before moving here is nearer to the town centre, more developed and less green. From April, their air-conditioner has been on day and night. Due to the noise emitted, most of the time I can no longer open the door of my ground floor flat for better air circulation and daylight. At the same time, the air-conditioner keeps dripping water throughout the day, making the area damp and slippery.

At the same time, in view of the rising rents, some landlords have become more aggressive in their pricing. In April 2011, the ground floor unit in front of my house was rented out to a tenant at HK\$4,000 per month after the departure of the previous tenant, who had been paying HK\$3,800 a month. Upon expiry of the one-year lease in April 2012, the landlord demanded a 20% increase in rent to HK\$4,800 per month. The tenant was unhappy with the landlord's aggressiveness and decided not to renew the lease. The day after the tenant had moved out, the landlord started to renovate the house. Substantial works have been involved to upgrade the unit. The landlord managed to lease the unit out for HK\$6,000 in July 2012. In other words, in less than 18 months the rent of the same unit jumped by almost 60%.

In this way, the village, as a place to live, is gradually becoming subdued to economic and market forces. Monetary considerations also become more dominant in landlord-tenant relationships. Besides, changes in rental levels are not the only transformation that we will see. One obvious change is language. I find that sometimes I hear and speak English more than Cantonese at my own doorstep, although I am living in a rural village in Hong Kong, where the majority of the population is Cantonese speaking. Within my own block, I am now the only Chinese resident. The others are three white middle-class people and one domestic helper of Sri Lankan origin. According to some estimates, approximately one-third of the population in South Lantau are now non-Chinese speaking, including residents of European, US, African and South Asian origin.²⁷ This demographic change was highlighted in the controversy surrounding the proposed relocation to Mui Wo of Christian Zheng Seng College, a rehabilitation

²⁷ South Lantau Education Concern Group, *Seven Fallacies in Outsiders' Views on south Lantau and SDSS* (外界對南大嶼山及新界鄉議局南約區中學的七大謬誤).

school for young drug users. The Rural Committee in Mui Wo and a group of parents in South Lantau seized this opportunity to demand for the reopening of the local secondary school, which was closed in 2006 due to under-enrolment. Some hope the proposed school to offer bilingual curriculum, while others would like to see an international school established, or a Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) school that would provide an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, based on the rationale that there have been significant demographic changes over the past few years and there is a stronger demand for English medium education. As we shall see below, language differences will also have implications on how village affairs are managed.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Mui Wo was pronounced ‘dead’ in 2006 due to a quiet property market. Since a few years ago, I have been hearing that housing prices in Mui Wo and South Lantau are on the rise. One of the more common explanations that I have come across is that many members of the transnational capitalist class have moved to Mui Wo from Discovery Bay, an upper middle class residential compound lying in the southern side of Lantau Island, due to nuisances caused by nightly fireworks at the Hong Kong Disneyland, which was opened in September 2005. The price of an apartment in Discovery Bay is easily the equivalent of the price of a three-storey house in Mui Wo.

However, during the seven years that I have been in Mui Wo as a resident, I had never felt such pressure in terms of housing costs like I did from around 2011. One of the main reasons of my feeling the heat, I reckon, is that the latest wave of increasing rents has (finally) hit Kau Tsuen, the village where I live, which is one of the more remote villages in Mui Wo and thus among the lowest in rental levels. Over the year of

2011, I have been hearing news that flats in the village and other places throughout Mui Wo have reached new highs in their transacted rents. I kept wondering why – it has been seven years since the opening of Disneyland and this factor alone seems inadequate in explaining the cause behind such rental increases.

Blondie reminded me of the reason why there is a ‘sudden’ surge in rents: the new Tung Chung Road, completed in 2008 and open to traffic in 2009, is gradually making its mark. It makes South Lantau more readily accessible to North Lantau, where the airport is located, and to urban areas in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island through Tsing Ma Bridge. Together with the decrease in attractiveness of Discovery Bay to some, more people, notably members of the transnational capitalist class, are buying up properties in South Lantau including Cheung Sha, Pui O and some parts of Mui Wo. These parts are popular locations to the transnational capitalist class as they are accessible by motor vehicles, making them connected to the larger transport network linking the airport and urban areas, while offering a ‘green’ and ‘rustic’ lifestyle. As mentioned above, many of these buyers are snapping up three-storey houses *en-bloc*. This has created a significant demand for housing. Tenants are then forced to move and as seen above, some of them are obliged to move to more remote villages. This process takes time. I reckon it is reasonable to start witnessing the resulting rippling effect in Kau Tsuen, relatively far away from other major villages, in 2011, i.e. two years after the opening of the new TCR.

Of course, accommodation costs have seen ups and downs and this is not the first time the village has witnessed a boom in the housing market. As far as I can investigate, at least one previous boom was also related to a road.

iv. More houses, people and money

My landlord bought a piece of land from an indigenous villager and commissioned a builder to construct the 3-storey house where I am currently living in 1989 when there were plans from the government to build the Lantau North-South Road Link between Tai Ho Wan in North Lantau and Mui Wo, passing Tung Chung on its way. Apparently, he was expecting holidaymakers to come directly by road access to our village, which is a 15-minute bicycle ride uphill from the pier. The original builder of the house has confirmed to me that it was indeed intended to be built as a holiday home, and that the landlord was hoping to seize the business opportunity that would be brought about by the opening of the new vehicular access. The house behind ours was also built at that time.

Site investigation and preliminary works for the proposed Lantau North-South Road Link had already started and a construction cost of HK\$1.3 billion been earmarked, when an Environmental Impact Assessment report found that the project would result in serious adverse environmental impacts. The Environmental Protection Department held that there would be substantial loss of woodlands because of the road works, threatening the survival of 'ecologically valuable fauna and bird species'. As a result, the road plan was scrapped in the second half of 2000.²⁸ The hope of my landlord to ride on the opportunity brought about by the road seemed to have vanished. However, the construction of the Hong Kong International airport at Chek Lap Kok in North Lantau in the 1990s brought another opportunity. Long-time residents told me that Mui Wo attracted some foreigners working at the airport construction site to rent a flat here. For some time, my landlord was able to rent out his flats at very good rates but after the

²⁸ Transport Bureau, 'Legislative Council Panel on Transport: Lantau North-South Road Link', November 2000, <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr00-01/english/panels/tp/papers/a205e07.pdf> (accessed 23 July 2013); Lu, *Lantau Island*, 111 °

airport was opened in 1998 and the departure of these foreigners, rents began to fall. When resident Fun rented the first floor of the house for HK\$2,600 per month in 2003, my landlord showed her the old 'For Rent' signs that he had put up previously. The number went down gradually from over \$6,000 per month to the level of less than HK\$3,000 in 2003.

I myself first moved to Kau Tsuen in 2008 and to my present flat in 2009, when the village was still relatively quiet. Since then, the village has become more occupied and rents more expensive. I have mentioned above that the use of English has become more common in the village, as is the case with French as there are a few French-speaking inhabitants. The moving in of more members of the transnational capitalist class is creating an impact on the daily life and landscape of the village. The increasingly strong presence of this class segment in Mui Wo is giving further impetus to developmentalism, making the place more conformed to a certain idea of modern living. Moreover, based on their tendency for a rational approach to problem-solving, the transnational capitalist class tends to resolve conflicts and problems through the intermediary of a third party whom they can trust and who speak their language – English and a technical, legal language, instead of Cantonese and everyday parlance employed by the average villager (and the village chief for that matter). Finally, property rights constitute a value so central and dear to the transnational capitalist class that they undervalue user rights and responsibilities at the same time. This means that many tenants from the TCC no longer take up their user responsibilities, and refer all problem-solving tasks to their landlords. When the landlords, especially those absentee landlords (a phenomenon increasingly popular as property has now become income-generating in

Mui Wo), fail to deal with the problems properly, the government will often be called in. All these invite the intervention of such government agents as the police and government officials together with their power. Government services result in the expansion of bureaucratic state power.

To Lefebvre, state intervention does not just occur episodically or at specific points but incessantly, by means of diverse organizations and institutions devoted to the management and production of space. The aim of such intervention is to make state space appear homogenous, organised according to a rationality of the identical and the repetitive. This allows the state to introduce its presence, control, and surveillance in the most isolated corners – in such cases, they cease to be ‘corners’ and no longer escape the reach of the state.²⁹ However, it would be a mistake to reify the state. At the everyday level, the state exercises its power and presence through the intermediary of its agents, and what matters is the set of social relations and negotiations that they enter into with people. Below, through two examples I will show that it is not only state intervention *per se* but also the interactions between state agents and the people that matter.

v. When the government intervenes... where are the users?

I have discussed the replacement of the septic tanks with a centralised sewer in Mui Wo in Chapter 3. In one case, the TCC tenants of a three-storey house preferred to put up with an overflowed septic tank for 10 days than hiring somebody to clean the mess up, on the grounds that they are not the property owner. They would rather wait for their English landlord to return to Hong Kong to deal with the problem. In fact, the septic tank of this house repeatedly overflowed due to overuse, and the same happened again in December 2012. The mess sat there for at least two weeks, and residents living

²⁹ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 227.

in the houses behind the block suffered the smell and the nuisances during this time. Finally, somebody called the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) to act. At first, the responsible FEHD officer tried to speak to the tenants, asking them to have the mess cleaned up, but their response was that they could not reach the landlord. In the end, the officer mobilised a team of at least ten FEHD workers to clean up the mess spilled over onto the small path. While the workers were cleaning, I talked to this officer, who said he was puzzled by the attitudes of the tenants. ‘As far as I know, a common practice in these overflow cases is for the tenants to call a service provider to clean up the septic tank, and then share the cost with the landlord. As users, tenants should share the responsibility as well.’ I told the officer this is what I understand as the usual practice, too. ‘They have two kids themselves, and the exposure of faeces just behind their house is going to pose health hazard to them,’ he continued. While I have mentioned in Chapter 3 that some farmers use animal and human waste as fertilizers, the precondition is that such waste be handled and covered properly. Waste from humans, who are carnivores, spread diseases if it is not handled properly. In the end, the officer said he would file a report and ask the health inspector to come to the village. The latter would decide whether to sue the landlord or not.

During the above conversation with the officer which lasted for about twenty minutes, none of the tenants from the house concerned came out to see what was happening, nor did they talk with anyone from FEHD (I myself was alerted to the situation by the noise caused by the arrival and work of the team of ten workers). As seen from the above, the officer was not a strict-faced bureaucrat, but also showed his flexibility and empathy, and suggested viable options for residents at various points.

First, he asked the tenant to contact the landlord to handle the problem, but it was the tenants who said they could not, something which the officer said he found it unbelievable ('How come a tenant not be able to contact his/her landlord?'). Second, he suggested the solution in case the landlord was absent, i.e. the tenant to pay for someone to clear up the septic tank first, and then split the cost with the landlord. Finally, he was aware of the family conditions of the tenants and showed his concern for the kids.

However, at these various points, he failed to solicit any useful action from the tenants. In the end, he followed strictly the official procedures at every turn: calling in a group of government workers to clean, filing a report back to the bureaucracy, inviting the intervention of the health inspector, and eventually suing the landlord. In this way, government health discipline reaches even the farthest corner of Mui Wo, itself lying on the fringe of the metropolis because a user refuses to take up the basic responsibility. However, this happened not only because of the government imposing their presence, but also and above all because of the refusal of the TCC tenant to take up any responsibility and to negotiate with government agents when given the chance.

Let me now look at the matter the other way round: had the tenant accepted that as user, they should take care of the septic tank and any problems associated with its use, the government agent would not have to be called in; the property owner would not be sued by the government either. When more obligations are referred to the owner, property ownership will also take up more weight, and hence more power. On the contrary, when tenants assume their share and do not refer every single problem to the property owner, the weight of users will be enhanced and at the same time, the significance of property ownership will be challenged, at least on the moral ground; it is

not that sacred anymore. In fact, most property owners realise the basic fact that the well-being of the house hinges heavily on a responsible user. As an everyday user, the tenant has a direct bearing on the conditions of the house; and when s/he cares about it, s/he also takes up a stronger moral position and establishes a stronger case for user rights.

To be fair, the TCC are not the only ones who invite the intervention of the state agents, many locals in Mui Wo also call in various government departments to settle conflicts and solve problems in everyday life. This is particular the case ever since the government has set up the '1823 hotline'. Anyone can just dial this four-digit number for government assistance and the hotline will transfer one's request to the appropriate department, whereas in the past, one has to at least know which particular department and number to call. In this way, residents are tempted to call the hotline for a felled tree, for instance, whereas in the past when government 'services' are less accessible, they might just clear away the tree themselves.

However, when frontline government officers arrive on scene, there is still a huge difference that effective communication and users' involvements can make. I have shown in the above example how the interactions between TCC residents and state agents led to state intervention strictly by the book. I am going to show in my second example how user involvements and negotiations with state agents can soften their intervention.

Hong Kong is usually quite humid in the months of March and April, and Mui Wo is no exception. It can be quite inconvenient to our daily life. The summer months of July to August are very hot too. Many residents would switch on their air-conditioner to maintain a more comfortable humidity level and temperature inside the house. With

more residents in Mui Wo adopting a modern lifestyle, running air conditioners have become a constant scene from as early as April each year. Apart from the noise and heat emitted to the atmosphere by these machines, water dripping has emerged as another problem. The air-conditioner from my neighbour upstairs drips water onto the ground whenever it is on. Mila, my Filipina neighbour living in the block behind me, came up with the idea of collecting the water dripping from the air-conditioner by putting a water bottle underneath. She suggested me to recycle it to water my plants. I found it a very clever idea and have been doing so ever since. I also make sure the water will be used to water my plants within a day or two; otherwise I will store it in a covered bucket or just pour it away. In this way, waste water can be transformed into something useful.

I have also mentioned above that the air-conditioner of my neighbour next door remains on day and night from April. It drips water onto the ground all day long, ‘as if it were raining’, commented one village elder when passing by. The moist ground has engendered an increasingly thick layer of mould and attracted a number of small insects. As mentioned, this family also complained about the proliferation of mosquitoes in front of their door. Subsequently, they filed a complaint to the FEHD, asking them to take action. When the FEHD workers and their supervisor made their first visit, they sprayed anti-mosquito oil, checked the environs and poured away any water found in containers as a standard measure to prevent the breeding of mosquitoes – including the water that I had been saving from the dripping air-conditioner upstairs and from rainwater.

In this way, presence, control and surveillance by government bureaucrats reach the farthest corner of a small village in Mui Wo. Without doubt, by pouring away the water in my container the FEHD believe they are doing good to me and the village.

However, the act of an individual trying to recycle waste water is being compromised. The government is invited to the village to perform a ‘service’, but along with this also comes power. We have seen in Chapter 3 that the installation of a centralised sewerage system, which comes as a form of government ‘service’, will introduce state power which forms our body discipline as to how individuals are supposed to deal with and dispose of their excrement. Likewise, the presence of the state to perform the service of controlling the proliferation of mosquitoes will discipline individuals as to how they should treat waste water.

There is also a price to pay for centralised surveillance. A set of standard solutions are deployed across the board, irrespective of the situation. In this case, chemicals are sprayed to the village surroundings when there is in fact a direct and more efficient way to tackle the problem – if only all the air-conditioner owners would take the simple measures to properly conduct and dispose of the water coming out from their machines. Moreover, at the end of the day, mosquitoes are part of life in Mui Wo – they are all the ‘inconveniences’ that go together with a ‘greener’ life. The attempt to eliminate them is just like the driving away of dirt that I discuss in Chapter 3 – it is the attempt to develop Mui Wo to make it conform to a certain idea of modern living.

However, as discussed in my example concerning an overflowed septic tank above, government bureaucrats are willing to show their flexibility at various points, and there is room for negotiation between them and the people. In this case, some residents who oppose to the use of pesticides in the village had tried to talk to the frontline staff of FEHD to dissuade them from such practice. The frontline staff said that personally they knew it was not a good idea but if they failed to perform the duty as assigned by the

Department, they were also worried about any negative consequences on their job. On one occasion, the residents gave their telephone number to the FEHD staff such that their supervisor at the Department could check and confirm that it was the residents' wish that no pesticide was used. This is a negotiation on the part of local residents to try and resist government intervention – if not the very presence of the government, at least its attempt to apply standard practices to homogenise space. However, for many of the TCC who simply do not speak the local language at all, this negotiation with front-line staff at the micro-level becomes impossible. And of course, as shown in my first example above, many TCC emphasise property rights above all, and do not see any user responsibility and hence the need to negotiate with government agents as users.

The redevelopment of Paris under Haussmann's urban planning, kicked off with the construction of grand boulevards, shows that in the process of modernization and development, neighbourhoods are being destroyed and people displaced. Richard Sennett has also noted that Haussmann's plans have led to homogenization of neighbourhoods, since new districts in Paris were to be of a single class, and rich and poor were to be isolated from each other in the old central city.³⁰ The building of Shek Pik Reservoir, again connected to a road, as recorded by Coates and also an anthropologist carrying out his field research in the 1950s,³¹ also led to the uprooting of villages in their entirety. People's livelihood in Lantau at large was also affected. To date, I can still hear elderly people recounting the days when rice was being grown in Mui Wo, but the activity came to an end after Shek Pik Reservoir was built, as water was being diverted to the reservoir.

³⁰ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1992), 297.

³¹ Armando da Silva, *Tai Yu Shan*.

Changes rolling out in Kau Tsuen and Mui Wo today, related to the redevelopment of Tung Chung Road, may be less dramatic than that of Shek Pik in the 1950s or Paris in the nineteenth century, but they were not in the least less profound. The major forces behind changes in Kau Tsuen and Mui Wo at large that we witness today emanate from globalisation and capitalism, of which the government is an actor. In contrast, in Chapter 3, we have seen how we can transform waste into something useful and creative using our own body and opening up our various senses. Similarly, in Chapter 4 we have discussed how our body techniques can bring along progress, and how our various senses bring us joy and satisfaction. In these cases, development can be undertaken by the self and by the cooperation of different individual selves. We are able to enjoy a better life without any government intervention to build an incinerator for us, or to build more and wider roads. Government intervention, through its services and facilities, is also a form of power. In freeing ourselves from reliance on the government to improve life, we also gain our freedom from modern governance.

vi. ‘Government, government, government’

We have seen how the construction of a major trunk road has led to the arrival of the transnational capitalist class together with their capital and lifestyle in the community of Mui Wo. However, the conquest and control of space is not without contradiction, the most serious dilemma being the fact that space can be conquered only through the production of space. Harvey has noted that when capitalism’s powers of ‘creative destruction’ are unleashed upon the geographical landscape, due to the fixity of spatial organisation, movements of opposition from all kinds of quarters will be

activated.³² In the following, I am going to discuss how an attempt on the part of the government to expand a small village path into a big road encounters opposition from local villagers, and how the small and winding path treaded by an independent video arts group offers the vision of an alternative road of development along which time and space is not governed by capitalistic demands.

One morning in October 2007, a group of three to four workers came to the village of Kau Tsuen with their bulldozer and diggers to break open the path of the village of about one metre wide. The works, commissioned by the government, were to repave the path and to widen one section into three metres wide. The works alerted three artists of Video Power (VP), a Mui Wo-based independent video production group, who had their workshop located in the village. The artists, together with a small group of friends and villagers, confronted the construction workers and village head to query about the meanings (or meaninglessness) of the works. They questioned the necessity of redeveloping the path when its conditions were still good and above all the necessity to widen the section in question into a road of three metres wide. The workers retorted they were only doing what the government asked them to do and that they were only earning a living, while the village head said he was only doing it at the service of the village. In the heated exchanges between the group and the workers and village chief, the problematic of development as a practice and ideology is repeatedly touched upon. After about an hour of heated debate, the village chief agreed to repave the path only but not to expand it into a road of three metres wide. The whole episode was recorded by the artists using their hand-held video camera. This incident later formed the first part of a

³² Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 258.

video documentary entitled *Small Paths Lead Us Home* produced by VP in 2011.³³ I will first discuss the details of this incident before I turn to discuss the arts of VP in broader terms.

In fact, it is a very common practice in Hong Kong to carry out ‘improvement works’ to public facilities that still function well and this has almost been taken for granted – it is one of the main reasons behind the rampant developmentalism that we are witnessing today, so much so that few would question its reasonableness anymore. After learning that the old path would be broken open, only to be repaved with brand new concrete, one villager asked: ‘Where is the problem?’ Apparently, she did not understand why the VP members and some villagers would oppose if the path was to be repaved. When one VP member told her they found such practice a wastage of resources, she said: ‘Oh, wastage!’ as-a-matter-of-factly and somehow this idea had never crossed her mind. When asked if she found such practice wasteful, she said she was indifferent. I am sure she is not alone in having such a reaction. During the post-screening discussion session after the documentary was shown at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in May 2011, a teacher in Cultural Studies reckoned the majority of Hongkongers would not see any problem in the small path being redeveloped either. I agree with him but would further qualify this observation: in seeing ‘no problem’ with developmentalism, people may not think it is a good thing but just accept this practice as a ‘normal reality’ or ‘commonsense’. In this sense, development has become not only an ideology (as would be implied in the term ‘developmentalism’) but also hegemonic, so much so that

³³ Video Power and Simple Fish Workshop, *Small Paths Lead Us Home*, 2011.

people would not think about revolting against it even when there is a problem (for instance, wastage).³⁴

During the dispute, the foreman repeatedly said that the works were commissioned by the government: ‘the government has said it had to be done’. The village chief warned that if the works, which had been approved by the government at the request of the previous village chief, were cancelled now, the government would not approve any more funding to repair the village paths in the future. In other words, the foreman, workers and village chief have been trying to refer the responsibility of the matter to a higher authority.

In contrast, the VP members tried to bring the responsibility ‘down’, implicating their own responsibilities as users and as residents of the village. When contesting the necessity to repave the whole path when only a small part of it has been damaged, they said they could repair it themselves. ‘Should we not assume our own responsibility since we live here?’ asked Yuen Fun, one of the members. At one point, she said to the foreman and workers: ‘(You) blame everything on the government. No wonder why the government is so powerful.’ An important point is implied here: when everything is attributed to or blamed on the government, more power is also rendered to it. I have discussed in Chapter 4 that government services are also power. Criticisms of the government for not doing enough are just the other side of the same coin: government is expected to do more and thus more people will have to stand in line to obtain what they need in daily life from government bureaucrats. When the village chief ‘warned’ the villagers of the consequences of their demands, depicting the government as an agent that would take its revenge (if residents do not take up its offer this time, it will not

³⁴ Williams, *Keywords*, 145.

entertain their requests anymore), he is inducing fear among the residents and inflating the power of government – for reasons valid or not.

The rule of state power is so powerful that people would submit themselves to its authority without the necessity of any coercion. In Chapter 3, I have discussed the installation of a centralised sewerage system throughout Mui Wo but the major village of Tai Tei Tong opposed to this initiative due to bad *Fengshui*. One village elder of Kau Tsuen, which falls under the ‘jurisdiction’ of Tai Tei Tong, had said he thought they should connect their houses to the central sewer; otherwise, the government might prohibit them from re-selling their village houses. I have posed this question to the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) Officer in charge of the sewerage project: whether villagers will be banned from selling their houses if they keep their septic tanks instead of using the new sewerage system. She admitted that the Lands Department, the government arm which is responsible for overseeing village houses, will not communicate with the EPD to see whether a particular village house has been connected to the central sewer before approving its sale. In other words, the connection to the centralised sewerage system is not a prerequisite for the landlords to be able to sell their houses. In this sense, state power is hegemonic in that people subordinate to such power accept it as ‘commonsense’.³⁵

While the village chief and village elder as mentioned above would refer to the power of state authority, one noteworthy point about the above incident concerning the small path, that lasted for about an hour, is that during the whole confrontation, no one – not the foreman, workers, village chief, VP members, or villagers – has ever thought about calling the police, the media, the district councillor or any experts or bureaucrats

³⁵ Williams, *Keywords*, 145.

to intervene in the dispute. Self-governance has been an important feature of village life in Hong Kong, although with the advent of modern development, government authority has become increasingly present in daily village life, as seen in the abovementioned example of FEHD agents being called in to deal with the proliferation of mosquitoes in the village. At the same time, it was due to the peripheral position of Mui Wo in relation to the urban core that VP was able to experiment on its arts. More precisely, it was in Kau Tsuen, which is a village marginalised (considered as ‘faraway’) even within Mui Wo, where they were able to carry out their experimental projects. Fun first arrived in Kau Tsuen in 2003, when the village was very quiet with only a few occupied houses. Due to the tranquillity, she kept her door open from day till night, and was able to have interactions with villagers and other living organisms – all kinds of insects, reptiles, rodents, etc. These experiences and the general atmosphere in the village proved to be crucial and inspirational to the works of VP later – as evidenced not only in the themes of their video productions, but also in their community-based creative work.

The village garden of Kau Tsuen had a significant position in the arts and community work of VP. It all began one night when Fun was contemplating stars on her veranda. Kau Tsuen was one of the last remaining places in Hong Kong where one could still see stars with a naked eye easily. She saw Ah Wah. The two stood on the small path of the village and began to talk about the stars, as well as the childhood memories of Ah Wah in the village. Later, Fun knew that the patch of small house land in front of them belonged to this indigenous resident. She asked him if she could grow plants on this land, since he did not intend to build house on it yet. Ah Wah said ‘yes’ immediately.³⁶

³⁶ Zerotime, ‘Small Paths Lead Us Home: Heartbeat in Earth and Heavens Chapter’, (小路引領我們歸家：心跳天地篇), 9 November 2012, <http://wp.me/pVwtZ-Tu> (accessed 14 December 2012).

This village garden later allowed VP to experiment on and develop their community-based work, including gardening and village-wide composting initiatives. In the documentary, we also note many more interactions among people, animals and plants were possible in and around the garden. VP's work defies capitalistic production time and logic – it is not related to any mechanical clock time and not tied to exchange value. It would have been very difficult – if not entirely impossible – for this to happen in another place in Hong Kong. The marginality of Kau Tsuen allowed it to preserve a whole patch of small house land from real estate development – at least for the time being. The 'outcast' personality of Ah Wah – as someone who is often a bit too drunk, not cunning enough in making money out of his small house land, but who is 'poetic' enough to play *Erwu* in front of his house and watch the stars, makes it possible for VP to try their hand for free on his land. The village's relative closeness to nature, including its plants and animals, its remote geographical position in comparison to other parts of Mui Wo and the urban core, and its lack of large roads, allow the artists to work and live according to a rhythm and temporality that is not governed by urban, capitalistic production norms. It is also around the village garden, together with the small path that runs through the village and the workshop of VP, where they developed and experimented on their arts and philosophy of life, including the idea about self-governance.

In the second part of the documentary *Small Paths Lead Us Home*, details of which will be discussed a bit later, a group of residents cleared the grass together along the village path; among them was a 6-year-old boy. Yun, one of the VP artists, also cut the long grass that had overgrown onto the path herself in one episode (at a time when

she was a resident of Mui Wo but had not become a core member of VP yet). When asked why she did this instead of waiting for somebody else (e.g. the government) to do it, she retorted: ‘Why should I wait for someone else to do it when I can do it myself?’

Self-management concerns the management of daily village affairs but is also more than that. It invites the intersection and interaction of different social forces in a place that is undergoing various socioeconomic changes such as Mui Wo: the differences, conflicts and contradictions engendered in the production of space, invite the manifestation of such forces based on their own history and affectivity. With self-governance in their consciousness, instead of calling in a third party to arbitrate their dispute with the workers and village chief, the VP members are obliged to engage in dialogues with these people and with themselves. In consequence, everyone is forced to reflect on her/his own and other people’s stance repeatedly.

The VP members and villagers who were against the expansion of the village path were not only resisting against the bulldozer but were also up against a hegemonic discourse surrounding development. From this point on, there were divisions among them on the question of ‘How?’ – How to react in front of the bulldozer and such a discourse? During the debate, there was disagreement among the VP members on their respective attitudes toward the workers, and among the villagers on the appropriate actions to take. Fun, the VP member on scene who was the most vocal opponent to the works, appeared somewhat aggressive in her language and attitudes – she used quite a lot of foul language and appeared unfriendly, even a bit aggressive towards the workers. Another VP member Warren blamed Fun for her grumpiness towards the workers, whom he thought are also the exploited under the system and are at least as powerless as

VP members. Meanwhile, one male, white villager of French origin, who passed by the scene after the argument had been going on for some time, accused the VP members of just ‘talking’ when the workers were digging up the path. His discontents with the lack of physical confrontations from the others have provoked some angry exchanges of words between the VP members and himself.

Fun later apologized to the workers and foreman before she broke down into tears to question her own identity: ‘If they are workers, who am I?’ In my view, she asked a core question and her question engages the others as well: ‘Who am I’ in the face of developmentalism? Who am I in society? Who are we in the village of Kau Tsuen? Where is our subjectivity? Her anger could tell us much more than unemotional reactions based on reasoning. Her grumpiness and foul language are also her force in her attempt to break through the hegemony of development and its discourse. Such hegemony is not only built around the foreman’s repetition of rendering the path ‘more beautiful’ and the village head’s claim of ‘doing good for villagers’, but also around the ‘common sense’ among the people: that we, as individuals, are powerless in front of development and the system. More than any form of power imposed by any authority, this sense of self-imposed powerlessness makes people even more powerless.

Self-management, or *autogestion*, as Lefebvre puts it, means ‘opening toward the possible’. It shows a practical way to ‘change life, which remains the watchword, the goal and the meaning of a revolution’.³⁷ Redevelopment of a small village path is a micro issue in everyday life, and yet it involves one’s deep-rooted values as to what constitute a better life, or how individuals are related to the wider society. From the

³⁷ Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber, *Autogestion, or Henri Lefebvre in New Belgrade* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2009), 104.

point where we no longer rely on the authority or ‘people’s representatives’ to decide on our behalf what and how development should take place, when we intervene in space using our imagination, memories, various senses and body, transformation of life has already begun, opening it up towards the possible, to borrow Lefebvre’s proposition above. When residents take matters into their own hands, when the management of space is founded on the permanent participation of the concerned parties, with their multiple, varied and even contradictory concerns, conflicts and confrontations are almost inevitable.³⁸ As we have seen above, among residents there were different concerns and priorities. Abstract space as the space of power also triggers off differences among the people, and no one knows what will come out of these conflicts and confrontations.

This ‘chaos’ poses challenges to abstract space, which intends to be homogeneous and rationalised. At this point, the ‘road’ also takes up a symbolic meaning – there is not a royal path leading to development; each individual with her/his own subjectivity has her/his own road. The female protagonist Sylvia, who is a writer in Coates’s novel, also partly impersonates the author, whose ‘sexual orientation’ made some of his colleagues within the post-War Hong Kong British Administration ‘not entirely comfortable’.³⁹ In his own Foreword, the author wrote:

... [Sylvia] was very fluent on the subject of herself, presenting no obstacles. In fact, she talked so fast that I nearly finished an entire chapter before realizing what she was driving at. It was my road.⁴⁰

vii. *Small paths lead us home*

³⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 422.

³⁹ Peggy Cater, Foreword to *The Road*, by Austin Coates (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), v.

⁴⁰ Coates, *The Road*, 3.

Likewise, the road has a symbolic meaning in VP's arts. As we have seen above, the first part of *Small Paths Lead Us Home* records an incident in which the villagers of Kau Tsuen and members of VP tried to preserve a small village path. On a metaphorical level, *Small Paths Lead Us Home* also represents the small, winding and difficult path followed by VP since 2007.

VP is an independent video arts group first established in 1989, in the full midst of massive social movements fighting for democracy in Mainland China and Hong Kong.⁴¹ From 2007, the two VP artists, Fun and Yun took over the operation of Video Power and rented the ground floor unit of a village house in the village of Kau Tsuen of Mui Wo to serve as the group's workshop, where screenings of video productions of its own and others' would be held, as would such activities as resident gatherings to discuss issues of interest to the community.

A few years prior to their taking up of the operations of VP, Fun and Yun had already moved to live in Mui Wo from urban Hong Kong. In explaining their decision to move to Mui Wo in the first place, Fun writes:

Many people moved to Mui Wo or (the village of) Kau Tsuen because of the relatively low rents. To Yun and I, it was exactly the opposite case. Had we stayed in our mothers' home in urban Hong Kong, Yun did not have to pay any rent, while I only had to pay a few hundred dollars per month. Ten years ago, there were only a few 300- to 400-sq ft units for rent (maybe it's because I did not know where to find them), but a lot of 700 sq ft units, offered at monthly rents

⁴¹ For a more detailed discussion, see Jimmy Choy and Cheng Chi-hung, 'To Intervene in Social Movements through Video Images: Video Power' (以錄像介入社會運動：錄影力量), in *In Search of the Independent Landscape of Hong Kong Cinema* (尋找香港電影的獨立景觀), ed. Esther Cheung (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2010), 255-264.

ranging from HK\$3,000 to 5,000. In 2000 when Yun and her ex-girlfriend moved to Mui Wo, the rent of HK\$3,000 for the first month was even paid for them by Yun's good friend. My financial situation was a little better than Yun's, but because I did not want to do a salaried job such that I could live an alternative life, a monthly rent of HK\$3,000 had already exceeded my budget. It took me quite a while to make the decision before moving to Mui Wo; in the end, the free and widely open rural space of Mui Wo, a cycling-based way of life and the slow rhythm of life have conquered my heart. Also, Kau Tusen, the village that I liked best, had a unit offered at a monthly rent of HK\$2,600 because of its remote location.

The most profound feeling that I had for the rural space of Mui Wo came from the countless nights when I walked among the interweaving small paths to explore the place during the first two years [upon moving there]. These winding paths with a width of barely one metre are not suitable for motor vehicles. Even bicycles had to slow down, [making the paths] safe for the elderly, young kids and the handicapped. Pedestrians and bicycles crossed each other, and naturally had to cede their way to each other. Sometimes, strangers signalled to each other, engendering a warm feeling. At that time, I did not have any friends in Mui Wo. I wrote, read, talked to friends on the phone and did housework in daytime; at night, I would be out the door after dinner, and got to know various villages, large and small, in Mui Wo step by step in the company of the moonlight, street lights and fresh fragrance of ginger flowers. When I got to large fields of wild grass and farmland, there were only a few pedestrians, and I felt free. My soul had a

breathing space. For the first time in my life, I felt that I had a home. This home is not confined by four walls, neither does it belong to me or my blood-related family. In fact, she does not belong to anyone, but belongs to every living organism. Here, I feel that I am connected to more lives, thus engendering a feeling of happiness.⁴²

In other words, the small paths of Mui Wo, the culture of slowness that they implicate and the connections with other people and living organisms that these small paths permit are a main reason why Fun would consider Mui Wo her home.

Due to the founding history of VP which is closely related to the social movements and historic events in 1989, as well as its heavy involvement in social actions in the years thereafter, the act of moving the base of VP from urban Hong Kong to Mui Wo in 2007 caused some social activists to accuse the group of ‘retreating from the frontline’ of social actions and of ‘squatting’ in the countryside.

More controversially, the group experimented the practice of ‘artistic subsistence grant’ (藝術生活基本資助) out of the one-year Development Grant given out by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) after fulfilling the work plans laid out in the HKADC contract. The idea was to let ‘grassroots creative artists develop their relations with the community on a *full-time and creative basis* and according to their own interests.’⁴³ Yun and Warren, both coming from a working class family and without a university degree, were the major beneficiary recipients of this artistic subsistence initiative. Over the subsequent four years, Yun, together with Fun, Warren, another core

⁴² Zerotime, ‘Small Paths Lead Us Home (Cultural Studies Chapter)’, (小路引領我們歸家 (文化研究篇)), 27 October 2012, <http://wp.me/pVWtZ-QD> (accessed 6 November 2012).

⁴³ Hoi-yan Au, *The Heart of My Days in Mui Wo* (窩心日子) (Hong Kong: Bai Luo, 2012), 195. [my emphasis]

member Cheung and a few other individuals, for a different time span and to a different extent each, engaged themselves in daily life activities in and around the workshop and village garden, and in Mui Wo at large, and undertook creative work based on such experiences on a full-time basis. The members had resided in the VP workshop for some time, which at the same time provided free short-time accommodation to young city-dwellers and sometimes overseas visitors who wanted to explore village life in Hong Kong.

In explaining its arts, VP writes:

From conception, filming, reflection to video-editing, it took anywhere from one or two years up to ten years for Video Power to produce its so-called individualised long documentaries from 2003. The time (we) spend on long documentaries is long...works are impregnated with a sense of history and sense of living. While we record the history and life of ordinary people, we create precisely for the history and life of ordinary people. The challenges that we face constantly are not the improvement of shooting or editing techniques, but the question of how to interact with documented subjects of various characters and backgrounds on an equal footing in the shooting process. In this process, we seek to represent the unique characters of every single ordinary person, in order to develop an equal dialogue between ordinary people and the wider world.⁴⁴

In other words, in its arts, the individuality that VP promotes is intimately related to the wider society. If anything, the individual in VP's documentaries is the underprivileged in society: for instance, Mok Kau-moon who sold Tofu dessert in a

⁴⁴ Fun Yuen and Hoi-yan Au, 'Works #21-14-7' (作品 # 21-14-7), 17 February 2010, <http://wp.me/PVwtZ-vT> (accessed 21 July 2013).

small street stall in Mui Wo,⁴⁵ or Granny Ho who stayed independent, living in her own house in a small Mui Wo village until her final days.⁴⁶ Underprivileged, elderly people are familiar subjects in the mass media or independent documentaries, but they are usually portrayed as victims of society to solicit pity from the audience. There is an unequal power relation between the subject, and the documentary producer and audience – in this case, power is the pitiful regard that the latter projects on the former. This kind of unequal relations can almost be reproduced instantly based on ethnicity, age, gender and class. There is no need for the documentary maker to spend much time in interacting with her/his subjects – which is why the mass media and certain independent video arts groups can produce such a large amount of works every year. Having an equal relation with its subjects is very much in the conscience of VP and this can only be achieved through patience and time.

In my view, the philosophy behind the initiative of ‘artistic subsistence grant’ is precisely a local, subversive response to the global phenomenon of space becoming product and time becoming strictly related to economic production under capitalistic development. Within VP’s arts, the linkage between time and money is disrupted thanks to the redistribution of social resources to guarantee the basic livelihood of individuals. Work and time are no longer entirely tied to production. Lived time, which has disappeared with the globalisation of capitalism, reappears while space is created as oeuvre. The initiative is also related to a non-industrial concept of time. I have discussed in Chapter 4 how work time and leisure time became demarcated with the rise of the factory system in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. With European

⁴⁵ Video Power and Simple Fish Workshop, *Mountain Uncle River Sisters*, 2011.

⁴⁶ Video Power and Simple Fish Workshop, *As Awesome As Granny*, 2007.

imperial expansion, mechanical time also became a symbol of supremacy. Asian cultures that were attuned to the cycles of nature, and valued leisure, patience and a slow pace of life were seen as exasperating.⁴⁷ To the VP artists, the artistic subsistence grant under their proposal also implies the rural concept of time, as distinct from the industrial time:

The artistic subsistence grant that we proposed ... was developed precisely on the basis of rural time concept and rural living. Over the past two years, we have not used mechanical time to divide our work and living, existence and creative work, art and play. Instead, (the activities) circulate and transform following the changing weather, the sun and the moon, body conditions, moods and feelings, and interactions with various organisms in the environs. We like to immerse ourselves in the fresh air full of vibrancy, enjoy the capricious landscape in tranquillity, read a brilliantly written novel that stirs our emotions, see a freshly washed bed-sheet hung up under the morning sun and swaying with the mild breeze, observe birds and insects carrying dry leaves and twigs in their beak on their way to build their nests, or give away freshly baked home-made bread to neighbours. Or, we simply listen to the gurgling of streams, leaving the over-worked mind with some moments of emptiness... These personal, intimate and satisfying moments cannot be divided or defined by mechanical time in the industrial world, but will be transformed into creative inspiration and the motivation to share the beauty of life with others.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, 243.

⁴⁸ Video Power, 'Time Concept of Cactus' (仙人掌的時間觀), 8 July 2009, <http://wp.me/PVwtZ-vL> (accessed 21 July 2013).

The group further notes that to breed original arts in Hong Kong, where the average time people spend on their job is notoriously long, the support lent to lived time is most needed:

...it is impossible for a society where everyone finds themselves in the labour market to develop a culture that is vibrant and diverse. Only an artistic grant that is rooted in the values of the life world can break through the obstacles in creative resources due to class differences, and can widen the thinking and horizons of Hong Kong society.⁴⁹

Moreover, under capitalistic work ethics, having a job is not only about wage earning, but also concerns one's identity and her/his contribution to society. A person's values are embodied in her/his job or her/his position in the job market. Work is equated with job, and not having a job is equated with laziness. In committing themselves full-time to creative work, VP members have to deal with such labelling as well:

Over the past two years, active VP members have either been envied by friends, neighbours and new acquaintances, or criticised by their family and so-called professionals. Some people criticise us for retreating from the 'forefront' on the basis of the past image of VP. Some others praise us for upholding our principles. However, none of the above views can touch the core values of the current VP – that is, the art of freedom. While our works and activities have the dimensions of serving the community and critiquing the society, we do not create for the sake of social functions (e.g. economic development or social movement). While the

⁴⁹ Video Power, 'Time Concept of Cactus'.

element of ‘working’ cannot be avoided in our creative process, we do not exist for the sake of ‘working’.⁵⁰

For the arts group, to develop the art of freedom is to create a free and idle space such that ‘everyday life outside work and consumption is meaningful’.⁵¹ They also distinguish themselves from what they refer to as ‘quality lifestyle people’, who constitute, broadly speaking, a class of young, middle class residents commuting between their job in town and home in Mui Wo. They emphasise on and even promote a certain kind of quality living, like developing a community network among residents, consuming quality and organic products, leading a healthy lifestyle, etc.

[The reason why] the lived time we embarked on in a rural village of Mui Wo is a revolution instead of a kind of ‘quality lifestyle’ among the middle class: quality lifestyle retains the alienated living structure of working / consumption under capitalism. We have departed completely from this structure and committed ourselves to a lived time linking up labour work, oeuvre, sharing, recycling and learning. The nature of interpersonal relationships among people with quality lifestyle remains utilitarian, with an emphasis on objectives and returns. The nature of our interpersonal relationships is non-utilitarian, focusing on communications and immediate satisfaction. Quality lifestyle people are subject to the tyranny of clock time, and oscillate incessantly in the conflicts between sentiments and desires.⁵²

Here, the opposition between ‘sentiments’ (情感) and ‘desires’ (欲望) is inspired by Mainland Chinese writer Han Shaogong in his collection of essays *Shannan Shuibei*

⁵⁰ Video Power, ‘Time Concept of Cactus’.

⁵¹ Video Power, ‘Time Concept of Cactus’.

⁵² Zerotime, *Small Paths Lead Us Home* (Cultural Studies Chapter).

(《山南水北》).⁵³ Based on his experiences living in rural villages in the Mainland, Han notes that sentiments are often related to things of the past, while desires are often linked to the future. He observes that in our rapidly changing époque, the frenzy of economic development is erasing everything of the past. In a sense, we have too many desires and too few sentiments, too much yearning and too few memories. Han further notes that even sentiments have become commodified with the omnipresence of capitalistic development, so much so those ‘losers’ in the market suffer in the double sense: losing both the right to desire and the right to sentimental memories.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Fun and Yun note that it is double suffering only for those ‘market losers’ who embrace capitalistic economic values. As for themselves who choose to depart from market value, ‘losing in the market’ is in fact a double blessing: they can both free themselves from commodification and the omnipresent mediated world, and repossess their own time, creating their ‘own memories in the marginal space of the destructive big wheels of capitalistic-state-development.’⁵⁵

We have discussed how big roads lead to development and the eventual uprooting of neighbourhoods. However, memories and stories connected to these places remain intact in writings and documentary recordings. This representational space is surely dominated by conceptualised space, like that drawn up by Haussmann, or government engineers within the Hong Kong British administration and the post-1997 Hong Kong SAR government. Nevertheless, this space of inhabitants and users, of artists, writers and philosophers is alive and speaks.⁵⁶ The ‘Great Island’ as recorded and described by

⁵³ Shaogong Han, *Shannan Shuibe* (山南水北) (Beijing: Zuoja Publishing, 2006).

⁵⁴ Han, *Shannan Shubei*, 32-33.

⁵⁵ Zerotime, ‘Small Paths Lead Us Home (Cultural Studies Chapter)’.

⁵⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39-42.

Coates in his novel has undergone tremendous development over the past few decades, but as a reader half a century after he first wrote his work, I feel connected to the place and people from another time. Villages as described in his story are long gone and people have passed away, but there is continuity in terms of the associated values, culture, livelihood and experiences, including the opposition to the development imposed by the government. Through writings and recordings, a temporal dimension and historical depth is added to the actuality. It is empowering to individuals – as subjects, we have our own roads and stories of development that are diverse and distinguishable from the state-led, capitalistic development.

viii. Lived time

Time seems to be an important notion in modern, capitalist society (‘Time is money’). Paradoxically, it is the disappearance and subordination of time that are of interest. I have discussed earlier that capitalism is characterised by continuous efforts to shorten turnover times, thereby shortening social processes. Lefebvre has also noted that with the advent of modernity, time has vanished from social space. Time has become strictly related to production, recorded solely on measuring-instruments, on clocks, that are as isolated and functionally specialised as this time itself. Lived time loses its form and its social interest – with the exception, that is, of time spent working. Economic space subordinates time to itself, while political space expels it as threatening and dangerous to power – when people are not restrained by the tyranny of mechanical time and can live out their own time and space, the creativity and spontaneity thus engendered can be so powerful that economic production and the premises of the capitalist system would be paralysed. This is why modern capitalism is so keen on

people having a programmed life - programmed all the way from how work is organised to how leisure time is spent. The primacy of the economic and above all of the political implies the supremacy of space over time. For individuals, such highly programmed life has a heavy price to pay. Our own time, the most essential part of lived experience and the 'greatest good of all goods', is no longer visible to us and no longer intelligible.⁵⁷ On a number of occasions, I have heard people saying they are so used to the working mode that they do not know what to do or how to spend their time during their days off!

While the first part of the documentary *Small Paths Lead Us Home* records the debate surrounding the expansion of a small path into a big road as we have discussed above, its second part deals with lived space and the time that space envelopes. It shows space as lived on the same path by inhabitants, users and artists over the course of six years. It records how the path bears their memories and experiences and traces their activities on and around it. As noted in the synopsis of the documentary: 'The small path harbours our memories; memories are our life'.⁵⁸ Going back to the triadic concept of production of space as proposed by Lefebvre, representational spaces have their source in history – in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people. Such spaces evoke imaginary and symbolic elements, and do not need to obey any rules of consistency or cohesiveness.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 95-96.

⁵⁸ Video Power and Simple Fish Workshop, *Small Paths Lead Us Home*.

⁵⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 41.



Fig 5.2: Documentary *Small Paths Lead Us Home*

The activities shown in the documentary are as varied and diverse as the people, animals and plants involved. It is indeed difficult to sum up their lived experiences with any consistency or cohesiveness. However, referring to our discussions above on lived time, one striking, common element about such experiences is the time people used for living, playing, working and creating (not time for production) in the public sphere. Space is lived out as *oeuvre* as opposed to product. In the documentary we witness the voluntary, non-paid labour work that this group of artists have carried out on the path, including cutting grass overgrowing onto the path and weeding a piece of ‘small house’ land, which would later be developed into the village garden by the same group of artists. We also see interactions and cooperation around a common task among inhabitants, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, and the work and play that they have engaged in together. It is often hard to tell work from play. In clearing a tottering tree branch, Ah Wah, an indigenous resident, showed his skills in climbing up and down the tree – although with some hiccups – wearing a pair of slippers. It was obvious that he enjoyed

the action and praises from other residents. On another occasion, two indigenous residents suggested to use pesticide to handle a colony of wasps found along the small path. Yun, one of the VP artists, did not agree with this approach but could not refuse their request. She decided to pour the contents of her pesticide container into another container before passing it to Mr Tsui, the village elder. It was a happy ending – the wasps returned to the cavity of a lamp-post where they had apparently constructed their nest, probably due to the hassle while Mr Tsui was not able to spray a single drop from the can.

In one episode, a couple Twins and Jianguo, who are from Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively, visited Kau Tsuen and helped the artists to build a compost pit in the village garden where villagers can dispose of their kitchen residue. They joked a lot – about the textbook that the Taiwanese young man had studied as a kid, about the rubbish that they found in the garden, etc. The couple also explained the idea behind the design of the pit. I became its user two years after its construction and have been using it since then.

The compost pit and village garden were part of a community initiative of the two VP artists, Fun and Yun. Since 2003, they started to clear the debris on a vacant small house land on a voluntary basis; they piled kitchen residue to obtain the compost so as to improve soil quality and gradually converted the land into a village garden. As discussed in Chapter 3, composting is a way to use our body to transform waste into something useful and precious to the soil. The village garden was a site for the VP artists and other residents to practise gardening for the whole village to enjoy on the level of the visual and other senses – the sight, touch and smell of plants. Residents would also consume

produce from the garden – lettuce, tomatoes, basil, mint, etc. The garden is also a site where Yun tried her installations. These included a pair of worn-out hiking boots for growing cactus and, as we have seen in Chapter 3, a glittering white toilet seat covering a heap of cow dung.

The garden also gave rise to other projects. In 2010, Yun began her photo-blog *All Yun's Photos* (《眾茵相》, my translation) to take one picture a day to record life in Mui Wo. She had the 354 photos that she took printed and handmade 45 books *Days in the heart of Mui Wo*⁶⁰ (《窩心日子》, my translation) to be given out to residents of Mui Wo in 2012. The photos are about plants, animals, human residents and the interactions among them, and about her life in Mui Wo. As she notes herself, the village of Kau Tsuen and the village garden are at the core of her project:

The year 2010 was the year I held up my camera with the highest number of times, pressing the shutter for more than 10,000 times... many of the times were for this project. If Kau Tsuen is my heart of Mui Wo, then the village garden must be my heart of Kau Tsuen. Among the 354 photos, many come from the village garden...⁶¹

According to her own account, the photo-taking project and the making of its main subject – the village garden, have been impossible without her being able to devote herself to her interests and community relations on a full-time basis:

The village garden and *All Yun's Photos* are the fruits of my interests: upon the allocation of the artistic subsistence grant [out of the one-year HKADC grant by

⁶⁰ Au, *The Heart of My Days in Mui Wo*. She follows the lunar calendar in her book and so there were only 354 days in the year.

⁶¹ Au, *The Heart of My Days in Mui Wo*, 194 °

VP internally] in 2007, other VP members residing in the workshop participated in weeding and other labour work [on the piece of small house land adjacent to the VP workshop] from time to time, and a few neighbours in the village joined the initiative of collecting kitchen residue. I was responsible for rotating and managing [the compost pit]. Meanwhile, I incorporated arts installation and permaculture principles, and followed the topography in the design and adjustments of the garden. In 2009, it was developed into an open, organic garden... providing aesthetic enjoyment for villagers and visitors, a natural practising ground for video workshops, and an option for children from grassroots families to learn through spontaneous play.⁶²

Seeing the documentary *Small Paths Lead Us Home*, reading the book *Days in the heart of Mui Wo* and other writings on a few blogs managed by VP, Fun and Yun⁶³ about Kau Tsuen and the village garden over the years, I feel connected to a part of history that I, as an individual, did not have first-hand experience. Through the narrative of the documentary and writings, I become part of a group that traverses time, sharing a common memory in and around the village of Kau Tsuen and its small path, as well as the embodied practice of gardening and waste disposal. These writings and images are all the more important with the advent of government-led capitalistic development, which in the process of rationalising and homogenising space, destroys traces of memories in the built environment. As we have seen in the novel *The Road*, development can also uproot a whole community.

⁶² Au, *The Heart of My Days in Mui Wo*, 195 ◦

⁶³ The blogs include *Zerotime* (零時光) (vpflow.wordpress.com), the blog of Video Power; *Seeknopoer* (窮無窮) (seeknopoer.wordpress.com), Fun's blog; and *All Yun's Photos* (眾茵相) (lesgrow.wordpress.com).

Representational space is alive and speaks. It has an effective kernel or centre – in the case of Kau Tsuen it is the village garden and the pit inside the garden. It is also the village path and the village at large. Representational space embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time.⁶⁴ The transformation of a piece of empty housing land into a public village garden and the construction of a compost pit are both development proper to the environment and daily life of certain inhabitants of a small village. This development can be referred to but is not interchangeable. There is use value and plenty of creativity, but there is no exchange value.

In the face of interchangeable and spectacular space, Lefebvre argued that to revolt, users can and must start from the presentation of counter-projects, of counter-spaces, leading to occasionally violent protests, and culminating in a radical revolt that calls into question the entirety of such homogeneous space, with its implication of everydayness, centrality, and spatial hierarchisation.⁶⁵ If by radical it means ‘affecting or involving the basic nature or composition of something’,⁶⁶ the radicalness of lived time and space surrounding the small path of a small village lies not in the staging of violent protests, but in the proposition of an alternative development view which is not based on abstraction, homogeneity and interchangeability. Rather, it is based on its *concrete* environment and thus is unique and irreplaceable. In this process, the body, absent in modern space, is being re-introduced. The body is implied, not to obstruct the bulldozer, but to intervene in space, the lived experience of which is kept alive through memories.

⁶⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 42.

⁶⁵ Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, 235.

⁶⁶ *The Penguin Complete English Dictionary* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

This memory, represented in writings and other art forms, cannot be destroyed by any conceived space.

ix. Marginal as radical

In 2010, VP made the decision to stop applying for funding from Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), in order to ‘rest and regenerate vibrancy, protect a healthy space and focus on developing ruralised video media arts’.⁶⁷ By leaving the funding mechanism, VP place themselves in the margin of marginality – independent video arts groups are already extremely marginal in the overall arts scene of Hong Kong, and VP is further marginalised among such groups. Yet it is there they remain radical outside the system.

As mentioned earlier, the decision to base themselves in Mui Wo after Fun and Yun took over the operation of VP has invited criticisms from urban-based activists, including one of the founding members of the video arts group, accusing them of ‘retreating from the frontline’.⁶⁸ Behind this criticism is a biased and derogatory view towards the rural, and an assumption that the rural is all about an idyllic and peaceful place. However, we see in *Small Paths Lead Us Home* that conflicts and confrontations inside a rural village can be very intense, and can be related to society – urban or rural – at large. Besides, there is no more distinction between the role of activist and resident: VP members embody both identities in Mui Wo. After the conflicts, they have to face the same village head, foreman and workers in their daily life. In a community where virtually everyone knows each other and where information spread very quickly in the

⁶⁷ Au and Yuen, ‘Works # 21-14-7’.

⁶⁸ Hoi-yan Au, Kin-Ling Tang, Warren Yu and Fun Yuen, ‘The Elderly are in the Wrong without Giving Back to Society; Flowers Cannot Flourish without the Young’s Creation’ , 19 May 2008, wp.me/PVWtZ-oY (accessed 14 December 2012).

form of chats and gossips, there is simply no escape from this closely knit web. Based on her twenty years of experiences in social movements, Fun noted that this is in sharp contrast to urban-based social actions, which are characterised by anonymity and a high number of participants, and which are relatively ‘safe’ as long as actions remain non-provocative to the authority. After the actions or confrontations, activists can leave the scene and return to their own safe corner.⁶⁹ In this sense, public actions in a peripheral setting are even more radical than those in the urban core: activists place themselves in a riskier and more exposed position. As interpersonal relations are direct and tend to be more transparent, such actions also have the potential to challenge and embarrass the dominant order head on.

It was also due to such unmediated and direct interpersonal relations and communications that VP were able to develop long and lasting relationships with various people in the community on an equal footing, going beyond the cliché of portraying the underprivileged to solicit social actions, and representing life in a more straightforward, non-sentimentalised manner. Their works were often criticised as ‘lack of sophisticated techniques’ by professional documentary makers.⁷⁰ Despite this technical insufficiency or precisely because of this, their video productions are filled with an unassuming sense of life that many ordinary Mui Wo residents and visitors are able to relate to. For instance, one of their works *Mountain Uncle River Sisters* was always able to evoke enthusiastic reactions from the audience; it was such a hit that the

⁶⁹ Zerotime, ‘Small Paths Lead Us Home : Heartbeat in Earth and Heavens Chapter’, 9 November 2012, wp.me/pVwtZ-Tu (accessed 14 December 2012).

⁷⁰ For instance, in a post-screening discussion, a renowned documentary maker criticized VP’s shots as too ‘oscillating’. It was one of the more common criticisms directed at the group.

group produced a few copies for the subject in the documentary, the late Mok Kau-moon, to sell the DVDs in his Tofu dessert street stall to generate extra income for him.

Finally, in criticising the ‘retreat’ of VP into the rural town of Mui Wo, those city-based activists failed to see the progressiveness and radicalness of the rural: it is radical precisely because of its marginal position. I have mentioned earlier that the marginality of Mui Wo as a remote community in an outlying island, in particular Kau Tsuen, which is marginal even within the community of Mui Wo, offers a unique place for VP to experiment on its arts. There, the slow pace of life, interactions between residents based on affects and not on monetary considerations, and a piece of village land not (yet) used for property development, among others, allow them to develop a village garden. It was around this garden, the small village path and their workshop where they could develop a unique combination of their arts and community work based on radical criticisms of the capitalistic mode of production.

In summer 2011, Fun and Yun left their workshop in the village of Kau Tsuen due to, among others, rising rents in the village. I have already discussed earlier how this latest rental surge is related to the development of the new Tung Chung Road. In 2012, VP filed for liquidation of its limited company status (arts groups are required to register themselves as ‘limited company’ in order to be eligible for HKADC funding); the two also moved out of Mui Wo as rents across the place have risen to unaffordable levels. Such has been their road so far. As noted by one viewer after watching *Small Paths Lead Us Home*, the documentary represents their ‘road of heart’ (心路) in the metaphorical sense. Half a year after they moved out of Mui Wo, Fun wrote:

To change our own ways of living in order to change this capitalistic world probably sounds like we are overrating our own ability. However, even if the world is not changed by us, we can refuse to be co-opted and absorbed by this world, and live out our own meaningful life... I feel blessed and proud for walking through this rugged, winding, small path. If I were to die today, I could say without regret: I lived up to myself. I lived up to the grassroots. I lived up to human beings, and I lived up to our dear earth.⁷¹

Fun wrote this passage on her blog when commenting on the strikes of dock workers at the Kwai Chung Container Terminal in April 2013. One of her criticisms of the position of unionists and young university students supporting this labour movement was their failure to touch on and attack the fundamental production relations in the capitalistic mode of production, and their reduction of the whole problematic, again, to the question of ‘How much?’ . In the end, the whole fight revolved around a number, i.e. the percentage of wage increase that workers could get.

...the revolutionary meaning of workers strikes...lies in delinking worker-employer relations under the capitalistic mode of production, to recoup the time and strength sold to capitalists back to ourselves, and through group cooperation and innovative experiments to practice production in a humanistic way, to build liberating social relations and live out meaningful lives. Yun and I make an income even less than the dock workers, and we do not have the support of any big groups. Yet, we have carried out our strikes for ten years. To us, this is not

⁷¹ Zerotime, ‘Strikes: Workers and University Students’ (罷工——工人與大學生), <http://wp.me/pVWtZ-YT> (accessed 6 May 2013).

utopia, but a reality that we have lived out outside the ‘Kingdom of Li Ka-shing’.⁷²

It is a widely-known fact that the working hours of people in Hong Kong are too long. It is impossible for a society where everyone works long hours in the labour market to develop a vibrant and diverse culture. The arts of VP and the ‘artistic subsistence grant’ that it experimented in Mui Wo have precisely tried to subvert the logic of time being entirely tied to economic production by guaranteeing the basic livelihood of individuals and freeing them from production-related work, thus allowing them to regain time for living and creative work. In contrast to the dock workers’ strike, the refusal to production-related work by VP and the experiment of their arts in Mui Wo is not at all about fighting for any wage increases, but about delinking time with economic production.

Many people are eager to get out of the abyss of the tyranny of production time, but many lack the courage to do so. As mentioned earlier, not having a full-time job does not only affect one’s incomes, but perhaps more importantly one is going to be prejudiced against in the mainstream society. Through such *oeuvres* as VP’s, more people would be able to see that there exist other possibilities, however marginal they remain, and that they are not alone in looking for an alternative path other than the dominant, capitalistic way of development. If more and more people can perceive this and take action, eventually there will be a transition from quantity to quality. By that time, it will be impossible for the society to remain unchanged.

⁷²Zerotime, ‘Dockworkers’ Strikes: Responding to Ying Chai’ (碼頭工人罷工——回應鷹仔), <http://wp.me/pVWtZ-Y6> (accessed 6 May 2013).

Chapter 6 Conclusion: The landscape

i. Capital and its discontents

Towards the end of my thesis writing, I was sitting outside a local tea café in Mui Wo on a Sunday afternoon, having a chat with a friend over a cup of milk tea. Ah Kuen, a common friend of ours, passed by and stopped to tell us about her latest grumbles. It has been a few years that she provides gardening services to the increasing number of standalone villas in Mui Wo and other places of South Lantau. Virtually all of her clients are members of the transnational capitalist class, who, as discussed throughout the thesis, have been arriving to settle in Mui Wo in the past few years in great numbers; they are the typical buyer of these newly built, luxurious villas. The average house prices and rents in Mui Wo have more than tripled over the past five years. Her clients often say to her that local Chinese should be happy with the arrival of westerners, and that the latter have 'saved' Lantau Island, since never before could local landlords reap so much money from their houses. However, Kuen thinks otherwise. To give us a latest example, she said a client living in a beachside house in South Lantau asked her to cut down a line of trees planted in front of his house, such that he would not have to take a detour when walking his dog to the beach. Kuen said she turned down the job, since she could not bear to cut down a row of dense, beautiful trees for money by her own hands. In the end, the client paid somebody else to do it.

The wetlands in Ham Tin, Pui O, another residential community in South Lantau, were gone, too, continued Kuen. She and her friends used to catch small crabs in that area, but now it is filled with concrete for more fenced villas. 'It is sad to see my birthplace becoming like this,' she said. A native of Mui Wo, she was born to a farmer's

family, and considers Lantau at large to be her home. ‘Do you not become more and more distressed as you go along with your research?’, Kuen suddenly asked me.

For a while, I did not quite know how to respond to her question. Yes, there is indeed every reason to be depressed. Just two hours before this conversation with Kuen, I received a text message from a friend of mine asking if I knew of any house for rent or sale in Mui Wo. Her landlady just doubled the rent to over HK\$10,000 she had been paying for a 500 square-foot flat near the Silvermine Beach. In effect, it was an eviction notice. Apparently, her landlady was confident that she would be able to find another tenant willing to pay such a high rent; and she was no doubt right. Many high-income residents have moved to Mui Wo and more are moving in. By then, I had heard of so many similar stories that I was no longer too shocked in learning about this latest one, but it was depressing all the same. Two of my best friends moved out of Mui Wo because of rising rents.

Unwittingly, Kuen’s question was highly pertinent in terms of the timeframe – the five years during which I conducted my research in Mui Wo roughly corresponded to the latest wave of escalations in property prices to previously unimaginable levels. As mentioned in Chapter 1, one of the starting points of my research was laments from certain local sectors that property prices in Mui Wo were too low, so much so that the place was pronounced ‘dead’. Soon afterwards, the situation began to turn the other way round drastically. Now, prices and rents keep breaking records virtually every week.

Anything in excess is potentially problematic. We may all recognise the problems associated with too many people in a place – overpopulation, or having too many tourists in a city will cause all sorts of malaises. Too much capital is also a problem. It is

not only about price inflation, but also about the way changes are being brought about by money. The man who did not like the trees in front of his house was able to have them all cut in a short time because he has the money (to pay other people to cut the trees for him). If he were to do it using his own body, he might have abandoned the idea altogether without being able to fell one single tree.

It was much in a similar way and speed that the transnational capitalist class, with their financial, social and cultural capital, has been sweeping across Mui Wo and other places in South Lantau, and it is what upset residents like Kuen. And June, too. She and I were walking through Chung Hau Street, the main street running through the old town of Mui Wo, with grocery stores, eateries and shops lining on both sides. We looked up at one of the first-floor flats where a new playgroup has just opened for business. Three large words ‘Stay and Play’ were written on the large windows facing the street. ‘Only in English, and you know of course whom they are targeting at. Mui Wo has changed so much’, said June. ‘I much prefer the words *Siu Yeh* 宵夜’, she said as she pointed to the signage of the noodle shop just opposite. In a predominantly Chinese-speaking community, the use of English only in shop signage and personal interactions has alienated many residents. Changes and transformations are necessary and healthy for a community to survive. However, the sheer amount of capital brought into a small community like Mui Wo has tipped the balance in favour of the moneyed class very quickly.

Due to money, interpersonal relations in the community are also undergoing dramatic changes. Landlord-tenant relations are being transformed by ever escalating

rents. Relations among residents and neighbours are likewise at stake with the penetration of capital. One example is related to a series of dog poisoning cases.

In early 2013, at least seven dogs were found poisoned to death in Mui Wo. Virtually all of the cases happened along a recently built emergency access between the two villages of Tai Tei Tong and Luk Tei Tong. I have mentioned in Chapter 5 that a number of luxurious villas were built there because of this new road. According to some residents, there was meat found lying on the side of the road sprinkled with red substances, likely to be rat poisons, apparently as a bait to poison the dogs. It was believed that it was the act of someone living in the environs who was discontented with the increasing number of people keeping and walking dogs along the road and the nuisances thus caused, such as a lot more dog excrement scattering around in public places.

Subsequently, banners and notices were put up in various locations by a group of dog-loving residents to offer a reward of HK\$30,000 for anyone who could tip off the police for this criminal offence of dog poisoning. Upon seeing these notices, one long-time resident wondered, 'Dog poisoning has been happening occasionally in the past. But never before had I heard of the offer of a cash reward to catch the killer. The atmosphere in the community has become very weird.' Indeed, dog poisoning has always been a way used by some local residents to settle conflicts they enter into, either due to the dog in question or the dog-owner. When poisoning instances continued in this case despite the cash reward, the offer was raised to HK\$60,000, apparently in a bid to make it more attractive to potential informants. To some local residents, this amount easily equals their income of a whole year. In effect, the reward is encouraging residents

to denounce their neighbour based on monetary considerations. The question, once again, is reduced to that of 'How much?'. Behind this increase in reward offer is the assumption that people do not denounce their neighbour just because the sum of money is not enough. If HK\$30,000 is not attractive enough, then it is just doubled to HK\$60,000. Whoever offers this reward does not seem to believe that there are extra-economic considerations in interpersonal relations. Nor does s/he seem to be concerned about the impact that this monetary offer may have on interpersonal relations in the community.

ii. Depression

Going back to answer the question of Kuen, the gardening service provider, but no, depressed is not all that I feel. Through such practices as local waste treatment and cycling in Mui Wo, an incident and memories surrounding a small village path, and the video production and community work by a mini arts group, I have tried to show in this thesis that not everything is governed by capitalistic logic. Though marginalised, there are values and development on the fringe of the global city of Hong Kong that are extra-economic. Kuen herself does not only believe in economic values either. She once said that although she is a small business operator and owns a modest self-occupied flat in Mui Wo, she would rather see a crash in the economy and capital values in general, since the market is becoming 'too crazy'. Single herself, she is worried to see that her brothers and sisters work so hard and do not have time for their kids and families. After saying this, she paused and looked a bit worriedly at me, as though I might think she was out of her mind.

Indeed, not too many people think like Kuen. Economic growth is an ideology in capitalism, and people's mind is trained to embrace this ideology, no matter how frantic economic growth is hurting our well-being. The more and longer we are engaged in labour work aimed for economic production, the less time and energy we have for our own enjoyment. Still, we are expected to believe in the universal benefits brought about by economic growth. When we believe in something else and make it known to others, we start to become anxious. Franco Berardi argues that in the age of digital technology and cyberculture, capitalism has managed to mobilise not only our body, but also our mind to produce capital value for the economy. The time apparently freed by technology is in fact transformed into cyber time, a time of mental processing absorbed into the infinite production processes of cyberspace. At the same time, the loss of eros in everyday life results in the investment of desire in one's work. We not only work but participate enthusiastically and happily in economic production. Since happiness is now related to economic production, anti-depression becomes a constant theme in the psyche of capitalism. Our society tries everything to fight off economic as well as individual depression. But ironically, the liberal economy is based on economic and individual competition. When economic competition is the dominant psychological imperative of the social consortium, the conditions for mass depression will be produced.¹ This perhaps explains why the generation born in the digital age seems to be vulnerable to this pathological condition. At the time of writing, a report in *Ming Pao Daily News* dated 29 April 2013 said that in 2012, 44% of the population in Hong Kong aged

¹ Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 79-100.

between 12 and 18 showed symptoms of depression; among them 16% were considered to be ‘moderately’ or ‘severely’ depressed.

Depression is deeply connected to the ideology of self-realisation and the happiness imperative.² To ‘cure’ their depression, people including teenagers are fed with anti-depressive substances to make them ‘happy’. In this way, happiness has finally become ideological, since it is intimately connected to the ideology of economic growth.

If the source of mass depression is economic competition, making people ‘happier’ such that they can launch themselves into competition again does not seem like a solution – in fact, we are throwing them back into the labyrinth. Instead of seeing depression as a mere pathology to be ‘cured’, Berardi urges us to view it as a form of knowledge. The goal is not to bring the depressed back to ‘normality’, but to change the focus of his/her depressive attention, to re-focalise, to deterritorialise the mind and the expressive flow. Drawing on Guattari’s work, Berardi argues that the depressed person should be given the possibility of seeing other landscapes, to change focus and to open up new paths of imagination. It is a practice of singularising the person, and to affirm his/her difference and actual possibilities.³

iii. The dog killer speaks

We may never know what drove the dog killer in Mui Wo to carry out this act, but it is rather certain that s/he is unhappy, and tries to resist and change the situation that s/he is facing. In another incident, the car tyres of a British lawyer were punched with holes in Pui O – it is a language through which discontented villagers were saying: this is not a place for you to park. The lawyer was furious, thinking the villagers were

² Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 99.

³ Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 215-216.

‘uncivilised’ in our society that values law and order. He thought the villagers should take action in a civilised and legal manner. Of course, he knew he would be the one who would prevail over the situation if the matter was taken to the police or the court.

Many people in the world are being left out in the globalisation game, or the universalistic language of civility and legality, or the use of English. Yet they are expected to play by these rules. Some of them refuse to do so and speak in their own language. Through dog poisoning or car-tyre punching, the person is speaking. Dog poisoning or car-tyre punching is their language, although it is unacceptable to the ‘civilised’. In a way, the persons have succeeded. The lawyer, though furious, dares not park his car in the place in question anymore. After the dog poisoning cases, the paths and accesses of Mui Wo are now much cleared of dog excrement, and dog walkers always keep their dogs on a leash as a safety precaution to prevent them from gnawing anything they find on the path, but this also means they will not run all over the place.

Still, the dog-lover wants to incarcerate this person by offering a handsome cash reward, because dog poisoning is ‘barbaric’, unlawful. The cash reward wants to bring things ‘back to normal’, but we may ask: ‘normality’ for whom? Life is no longer normal for many villagers. The globalisation of capitalistic development has changed their home and life in an irreversible way. The subaltern is speaking everywhere, but it is the ideology of the ‘civilised’ that prevents people from listening, discounting such speech as violent or uncivilised. I am not advocating violence, but ‘uncivilised’ and violent acts, under certain circumstances, are the language of those who are excluded or even driven into despair.

Likewise, the villagers of Tai Tei Tong who oppose to the construction of the sewer, or the villagers of Kau Tsuen who oppose to the destruction of a small path seem to stand in the way of Progress, but their act and stories speak, telling us that universalistic modernisation and capitalistic development are not so universal as they may seem. Instead of backward looking, these people, with their own history, memories and worldviews, are just different. History has not ended. Through their language and actions and making a detour to the past, they are pointing to an alternative future. My aim here is to affirm their singularity, and through this affirmation, hopefully more people can also see other landscapes and possibilities.

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