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Village (re)commoning: rethinking Hong Kong's rural built heritage as commons

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Abstract

In recent years, a growing number of village revitalisation schemes have been initiated in Hong Kong by nonprofit organisations (NPOs) with expertise in ecological and heritage conservation. Although many projects have been commended for their success, villagers feel excluded and remain largely disengaged from the revitalisation process. This article proposes redefining the current understanding of Hong Kong's rural heritage by introducing the concepts of *commons* and *commoning* as a relatively new theoretical framework for analysing village revitalisation. Although it has been mobilised in Hong Kong's urban context, the concept of commoning is rarely used as a theoretical framework for discussing rural heritage. What new knowledge can be derived from a commoning approach to Hong Kong's village heritage? How does this approach elucidate past assumptions regarding the value and significance of built heritage? How can the concept of commoning be used to reinterpret the relative success or failure of recent revitalisation initiatives? First, commoning can provide a better understanding of how village heritage was created and managed over time. Second, the literature on commoning provides better tools for understanding the historical processes that led to the disappearance of Hong Kong built heritage commons in the second half of the 20th century. Third, the concept of *recommoning* is helpful for better understanding the current situation of Hong Kong and the shortcomings experienced by some villagers. This paper also shows that many of the specificities of global contemporary recommoning are relevant to the case of Hong Kong and can partially explain the success or failure of some village revitalisation initiatives. Overall, this article reflects on how various categories of commons and the complex social process of commoning offer multiple advantages to improve our understanding of built heritage when analysing village revitalisation schemes in Hong Kong.

Keywords Village revitalisation, Commoning, Hong Kong

1 Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of village revitalisation schemes have been initiated in Hong Kong by nonprofit organisations (NPOs) with expertise in ecological and heritage conservation. Among these, the case of Lai Chi Wo (荔枝窝), a Hakka village located in the northeast corner of the New Territories, is probably the most notable. Led by a team of social scientists at the Centre for Civil Society and Governance (CCSG) at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), the Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme was launched in 2013 with the support of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) to replenish and revitalise the disappearing social and natural assets of Lai Chi Wo. It aims to provide evidence-based data and information for a viable sustainability model that nearby villages and similar rural areas in the region can replicate. In 2020, Lai Chi Wo received Special Recognition for Sustainable Development from the UNESCO Asia–Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.

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Although many projects have been commended for their success in reactivating the countryside through public engagement and educational programs, less attention has been given to addressing the needs and aspirations of local villagers. Many villagers in the New Territories feel excluded from the revitalisation projects led by external parties. As they often ascribe different values and significance to their heritage, villagers do not fully identify with these projects and remain largely disengaged from the revitalisation process.

For example, in 2017, when Lai Chi Wo was about to launch a plan to convert empty dwellings into guest houses, some villagers who had returned from the United Kingdom were not satisfied with what they saw as 'harsh contractual terms' set out in the leasing agreements. Some even claimed that they were not properly consulted on the matter (Kao and Ng 2017). However, the village chief of Lai Chi Wo, Tsang Wai Yip, remarked in the abovementioned news article that the opposition represented only a small fraction of villagers (20 out of 200 households) who were not directly involved in the project since the first phase consisted of restoring and transforming only 12 abandoned homes. He also added that he personally had flown to Belfast and Birmingham to consult with overseas stakeholders. Based on this experience, the villagers of nearby So Lo Pun (锁罗盆, Fig. 1) expressed a strong desire to conserve their traditional village assets and promote their culture on their own, expecting to take a more proactive role in the revitalisation process.

These discrepancies can be partially explained by the fact that most organisations tend to emphasise the promotion of wider public interests and environmental protection over addressing the actual social needs of villagers. Although local villagers are systematically informed and consulted through structured communication channels, funding bodies and leading NPOs tend to determine the directions and logistics of the revitalisation works to be undertaken according to their own objectives, which generally include long-term public benefits, as well as the conservation and restoration of ecological habitats and local biodiversity (Hong Kong Young Leaders Program Field Project 2016).

Fig. 1 Abandoned houses in So Lo Pun (Source: the authors)

Thus, the current understanding of Hong Kong's rural heritage needs to be redefined to address the aspirations and needs of local communities.

First, we should acknowledge international trends in the definition of heritage, which have been largely adopted by most NPOs but are not yet reflected in Hong Kong heritage law (Atha 2012). Built heritage is a crucial component of village revitalisation in Hong Kong, as culturally significant architectural structures and monuments are regarded as valuable traditional assets that symbolise the history and identity of the community that should be preserved (Chang 2023). However, importantly, built heritage extends beyond singular buildings, monuments, or even entire villages and must include the landscape and its intangible meaning (Boukhari et al. 1996). As part of a larger shift in the field of heritage studies and practice, the concept of cultural landscapes was introduced in the 1990s as a means to acknowledge the importance of the broader environment and the ways in which human activities shape and are shaped by it (UNESCO 1992). Throughout the subsequent decades, the recognition of cultural landscapes as an integral part of built heritage expanded to include diverse categories, including urban areas, agricultural landscapes, industrial complexes, and historic gardens (Rössler 2006; Taylor and Lennon 2011). This broader perspective highlighted the significance of everyday places that have cultural meaning and, in particular, encouraged people to pay attention to the social practices involved in the revitalisation process (Longstreth 2008; Watson et al. 2011). In recent years, the emphasis on the living and evolving nature of cultural landscapes has been growing. This shift includes a recognition that heritage sites are not static entities frozen in time but are dynamic and influenced by contemporary forces. Moreover, this shift emphasises the importance of sustainable management and the involvement of local communities in heritage conservation (Roe and Taylor 2014; Taylor, St. Clair, and Mitchell 2015). Today, cultural landscapes have been included in heritage practices in more nuanced and comprehensive ways. This approach involves the identification, documentation, and conservation of the tangible and intangible elements of a landscape that contribute to its cultural significance. This may include not only architectural structures but also the cultural practices, traditional land-use patterns, and intangible heritage associated with a landscape. These multifaceted interpretations of cultural landscapes are

evident in the case of Lai Chi Wo, illustrating a diverse set of understandings of what built heritage is and what role it plays in village revitalisation among stakeholders (Mak 2023).

Second, this article proposes introducing the concepts of *commons* and *commoning* as a relatively new theoretical framework for analysing Hong Kong's village heritage and its revitalisation. Elinor Ostrom developed the concept of commons in her book titled *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action,* which was published in 1990 as a response to Garret Hardin's famous 1968 *Tragedy of the Commons*. (Ostrom 1990) She presented empirical evidence of commons throughout the world that were managed sustainably for decades and even hundreds of years.

While discussions on these initiatives tend to focus on economic incentives and institutional structures, recent literature has questioned Ostrom's naturalistic and objectivist definition of commons as a type of resource. According to Jeong (2018, 177), a major shortcoming of Ostrom's approach is the focus on the institutions that guarantee the relationship between communities and resources with inadequate clarification of the agency of those who build and maintain these relationships. 'Commons are far more than the materials of which they consist of', writes Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (2012, 83), 'they are part of a web of relationships, both concrete matter and a process in motion all in once'. In her eponymous chapter, Silke Helfrich (2012) states, 'Common goods don't simply exist—they are created'. While Ostrom referred to commons as common-pool resources, scholars have shifted their focus to *commoning* as a social process (Linebaugh 2008; Bollier and Helfrich 2012). The 'concept of commons', according to Sandström et al. 2017, 510), 'is close to the concept of community as the ongoing process of commoning […] can be seen as an important part of the symbolic construction of community'. They argue that to better understand the commons, they need to be situated against their own historical and social contexts, where 'the relationship between institutions, resource management, and social development coevolve contextually over time' (Sandström et al. 2017, 509). In their historical analysis of the creation, dismantling, and reconstruction of the rural commons of the Ängersjö village in Sweden, they identified 3 types of commons that are relevant to the situation in Hong Kong. Preindustrial commons are considered *production commons* and involve 'labour intense collective resource use practices'. *Associational commons* were 'developed under the new economic conditions that emerged during the 20th century aiming at modernising rural life' and are part of 'the joint social and economic interest of the village'. Finally, *symbolic commons* 'revolve around different perceptions of kinship, ownership and belonging overtime that carry important symbolic values for the village'. They emphasise that these categories may correlate with one another, as 'associational and productive commons also have symbolic meanings to the villagers and they contribute to shaping village identity' (Sandström et al. 2017, 523–4). Similar to the New Territories villages in Hong Kong, the commons of Ängersjö today are 'shaped by discussions on how they are related to preferred ways of life, wellbeing, attachments to place, historical narratives and village identity, that are justified and constructed through various processes of reinvention and bricolage' (Sandström et al. 2017, 526).

Although it has been utilised in the context of urban collective initiatives (Hou 2017; Wang et al. 2023), the concept of commoning is rarely used as a theoretical framework in discussions of Hong Kong's rural heritage. What new knowledge can be derived from a commoning approach to Hong Kong's village heritage? How does this approach elucidate past assumptions regarding the value and significance of built heritage? How can the concept of commoning be used to reinterpret the relative success or failure of recent built heritage revitalisation initiatives? Based on field work and community engagement activities conducted in four villages (Fig. 2), this article demonstrates how various categories of commons and the complex social process of commoning offer multiple advantages to improve our understanding of built heritage when analysing village revitalisation schemes in Hong Kong.

First, commoning can help us better understand how village heritage was created and managed over time. As shown in Sect. 2, social processes, institutions, and preexisting traditions shaped most of the local subsistence economy and its associated resources over several centuries, and this can be understood as a form of commoning. After tracing the roots of commoning in Hong Kong's rural communities and categorising historical practices into production, associational, and symbolic commons, we demonstrate how these practices have supported collective decision-making and resource management for centuries. Second, the literature on commoning provides theoretical tools that can be utilised for examining the case of Hong Kong. For example, Sect. 3 demonstrates how the logics of enclosure and privatisation, which characterised much of the colonial period, elucidate the historical processes that led to the disappearance of Hong Kong village commons in the second half of the 20th century. Section 3 examines the gradual decline of communal practices before discussing the impact of industrialisation, ownership fragmentation, and ecological conservation policies and the influence of green groups on traditional commoning frameworks.

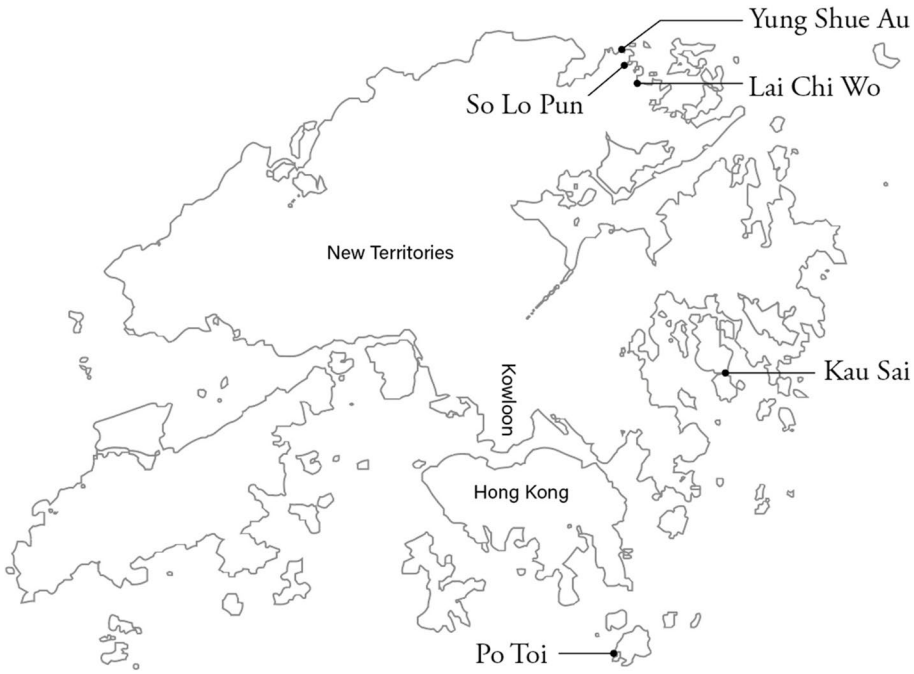

Fig. 2 Map of Hong Kong showing the location of selected case studies (Source: the authors)

Similarly, the concept of *re-commonisation* developed by Jeong (2018) helps us contextualise Hong Kong's current situation and analyse the shortcomings that some villagers have experienced. In Sect. 4, we demonstrate that many of the specificities of global contemporary recommoning processes, operating in a hostile state and market-led environment, are relevant to the case of Hong Kong. Focusing on contemporary efforts to reinvigorate commoning practices, Sect. 4 explores current initiatives across four villages, assessing how they adapt to and resist socioeconomic transformations through the lens of recommoning. Finally, Sect. 5 reflects on the unique opportunities and profound challenges of village revitalisation in Hong Kong through the lens of (re)commoning. We examine the struggles and successes of redefining built heritage as communal property, the fostering of community-driven common assets, the initiatives to preserve indigenous knowledge, and the transformative potential of new forms of knowledge commons. Through this exploration of Hong Kong village revitalisation, this paper aims to provide insights into how (re)commoning can leverage cultural and historical assets for sustainable community development and enhanced social cohesion within the broader context of global and local challenges.

2 Historical commoning practices

For several centuries, Hong Kong rural communities have been engaging in practices that have some of the attributes of commoning for collective decision-making and resource management. To review their historical development, we follow the three categories of commons identified by Sandström et al. (2017):

2.1 Production commons

The term 'production commons' refers to preindustrial productive landscapes such as forests, grazing areas, fishponds, and hay meadows, which are traditionally associated with resource scarcity and the maintenance of rural livelihoods. In Hong Kong, many productive landscapes, such as farmlands and fisheries, were considered commons and collectively managed by villagers. From the Song Dynasty onwards, newcomers brought rice cultivation to Hong Kong. Various ethnic groups, such as Hakka and Punti, settled in distinct valleys where they sustainably utilised natural resources (Hase 2006, Siu n.d.). For example, paddy fields were collectively managed, and the maintenance of irrigation systems constituted a shared responsibility. According to Tsang Yuk On, the village chief of Mui Tsz Lam (梅子林),[1] villagers used to employ a bidding system to decide who would be entitled to harvest the village's common Lai Chi tree (Tsang, Y.O., personal interview, July 21, 2022). While high seas and coastal waters have been common among fishing communities for centuries (Xiao 2009), the exhaustion of ocean resources by industrial exploitation since the

[1] Mui Tsz Lam is a Hakka village located in the Plover Country Park (船湾郊野公园) near Lai Chi Wo.

mid-20th century has compelled villages to collectively build and manage freshwater fishponds in many intertidal zones (Lai and Lam 1999).

2.2 Associational commons

Associational commons are established to address the shared social and economic interests of a community and can include village associations, community centres, schools, laundry houses, and other facilities. The organisation of these commons tends to be formal and typically comprises a specific group of people who meet regularly to manage matters of common concern. Relying on clanship connections and ancestral traditions, many of Hong Kong's self-governing rural entities traditionally organised intervillage activities, managed local resources, and addressed internal village matters.

Yeuks (约) are a significant example of historical associational commons in Hong Kong. They were established during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, and they were self-governing alliances among different villages of the same ethnic groups (Cheng 2012). The incentives to form a Yeuk were based on a wide range of common interests, such as security, trade, infrastructure, and resource management. Some Yeuks were initially established as intervillage defensive alliances against raiders and British troops, while others had an economic origin for trading and mutual aid (Wong, J., and Wong, H. C., personal interview, May 23, 2022). Each Yeuk had an elected committee with representatives from each village to discuss common matters, such as the exchange of resources, the assignment of duties, the collection of funds, and the building of intervillage monuments. For example, the Hing Chun Yeuk (庆春约), an alliance formed among seven villages in the Sha Tau Kok (沙头角) area, was established more than 400 years ago to build collective infrastructure, cultivate land, and exchange resources.

Another telling example of traditional associational commons is Tso Tong (祖堂), a clan-based landholding organisation. Dating back more than a thousand years, they were founded not only to transmit property rights to male descendants but also to strengthen clan unity and honour their ancestors Legislative Council (LegCo n.d.). They are highly regulated institutions that prohibit their members from fragmenting or selling ancestral commons Legislative Council (LegCo n.d.). Tso Tong members take turns caring for communal ancestral farmland and use the corresponding income to fund annual tomb-sweeping festivals, feasts, repairs, and other clan matters.

2.3 Symbolic commons

Symbolic Commons are related to the concepts of lineages, kinship, and ownership and carry important meanings and values for villagers. These commons can take many forms and are often connected with historical and cultural narratives, which play an important role in shaping village identities and internal social relations. In Hong Kong, villagers' everyday lives have revolved around shared values of kinship and ancestral lineage, religious beliefs, and ethnic identities, which in turn are embodied in tangible and intangible symbolic commons such as monuments, festivals, and even entire natural landscapes. Thus, many villages have created self-governing mechanisms to ensure the continuation of these symbolic commons.

Monuments such as ancestral halls, shrines, and graves have been important symbolic commons in rural Hong Kong villages. The most prominent of these monuments is probably the ancestral hall, a place dedicated to the worship of ancestors within a family lineage or clan. Many clans have maintained the traditional practice of visiting their ancestral halls when family members die and updating their genealogical records when new ones are born. An ancestral hall is often commonly managed by villagers within the same clan, and generations of clan members collectively maintain it. Even decades after vacating the village, such as in the case of Sha Lo Tung (沙罗洞), villagers will still visit the ancestral hall to clean it and clear the overgrown vegetation around it, especially when a family member has passed away (Li, H. M., personal interview, June 22, 2022). In addition to its ancestors, the Hakka people in Hong Kong worship Pak Kung (伯公), an earth deity considered the guardian of the land who provides safety and prosperity to the village. Like ancestral halls, Pak Kung shrines have been collectively managed and maintained as monuments for centuries. This practice continues today, as the case of So Lo Pun shows. For example, villagers contributed funds and self-organised the reconstruction of a new Pak Kung shrine in So Lo Pun after the old one was destroyed by

Fig. 3 New Pak Kung shrine in So Lo Pun rebuilt after being damaged by typhoon Mangkhut in 2018 (Source: the authors)

Typhoon Mangkhut in 2018 (Fig. 3) (Wong, J., and Wong, H. C., personal interview, May 23, 2022).

Beyond the maintenance and conservation of built heritage as a form of symbolic commons, it is critical to recognise the significance of their associated intangible practices. Traditional cultural practices and religious beliefs have strong symbolic importance among villagers, forming a kind of symbolic commons that draws them together. For example, the collective worship of Pak Kung constitutes an important symbolic common that gives Hakka villagers spiritual connections to their culture and traditions. Similarly, ancestral tomb sweeping often occurs twice a year during the Ching Ming (清明) and Chong Yeung (重阳) festivals and carries a strong symbolic meaning in remembering and paying respect to ancestors of the same village or clan. Furthermore, Da Chiu (打醮) is a festival that occurs regularly, ranging from annually to once every 60 years, and involves the worship of Taoist deities for blessings of protection and prosperity for the village. Many Yeuks that are still active today play an important role in organising the Da Chiu. For example, Hing Chun Yeuk members elect the Da Chiu committee, collect funds, and call for villagers to participate (Wong, J., and Wong, H. C., personal interview, May 23, 2022). As a unique Hakka cultural practice, the event provides villagers with a sense of identity and reminds them of their clanships and roots. Often conducted as a cross-village event, this festival provides opportunities for intervillage collaboration and social activities. Through contact with missionaries, some local villages converted to Christianity, and such religious beliefs also formed symbolic commons that spiritually tied the villagers together. For example, Yim Tin Tsai (盐田梓) is a Hakka village that has converted to Catholicism; religious activities, such as Feast Day (瞻礼), have become a communal cultural practice for villagers to gather and interact (Chan, C. and So, J., personal interview, May 19, 2022).

Although some of these commoning practices have lasted for several centuries, the drastic transformations during the past several decades have profoundly altered social relations and undermined some of these commons, sometimes irreversibly.

3 Decommoning factors

The concept of *decommonisation* was proposed by Prateep Kumar Nayak and Fikret Berkes in their analysis of changes in the governance of the largest lagoon in India over long periods. According to them, 'decommonisation refers to a process through which a jointly used resource under commons institutions loses these essential characteristics' (Nayak and Berkes 2011, 133). In their analysis of the Chilika Lagoon, they identified 11 key factors that contribute to decommonisation, including access rights, policies and fishermen institutions. They concluded that the 'disconnection of people from their resources is thus a major driver of decommonisation' (Nayak and Berkes 2011,143). Similarly, this process can be widely seen across different localities with the advent of capitalist development along with the privatisation and enclosure of the commons over the 20th century. Over the last six decades, Hong Kong's economic development, changes in land policy, and rural planning, as well as, more recently, the advent of countryside conservation, have threatened many traditional commoning practices, ending or weakening many local systems of governance and their modes of production and collaboration. This section reviews four key factors that have led to decommonisation in rural Hong Kong over the past few decades.

3.1 Industrialisation

The industrialisation of Hong Kong's economy in the 1960s and the 1970s created better job opportunities for farmers and fishermen, so local villagers moved to urban areas that were closer to places of production and consumption or even emigrated overseas to make a living. For example, many young villagers in the New Territories applied for emigration to the United Kingdom. In the 1950s and 1960s, most rural villages faced severe depopulation, and by the 1970s, many were left vacant. This was exacerbated when China's Mainland opened to the market in the 1980s, exporting its agricultural and fishery produce. Facing lower prices and a more competitive market, many agricultural and fishery businesses have progressively closed, and poverty has increased. The decline in the agricultural and fishery industries became a major decommoning factor. Since they no longer served a common goal, many of the production commons and their associated commoning practices became obsolete. For example, the Ap Chau Fisheries Cooperative (鸭洲渔业合作社) was an institution of production commons that gradually disappeared as the number of fishermen declined and leaders emigrated. (Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark 2019) In other cases, intervillage trade networks broke down as production and, thus, exchange declined. This, in turn, transformed the nature and role of the Yeuk.

3.2 Fragmentation of ownership

According to traditional Hakka customs, each family or clan shares its own land and other spatial tangible resources. As aforementioned, communal assets such as ancestral halls, the Pak Kong Shrine, and Feng Shui woods were shared among village members. This understanding and management of spatial tangible assets

were challenged when the British colonial government surveyed the land in 1898 and imposed individual land ownership to facilitate tax collection. Although this ownership registration system may not have significantly altered traditional collective resource management when villagers still lived and worked in the village, it later created constraints and challenges for alternative ownership models.

As the city's population increased dramatically in the decades after WWII, the government planned to create New Towns, located mostly in the New Territories, to provide more land for housing. As part of the compensatory schemes for land acquisition, the Small House Policy was adopted in 1972 and entitled all male local villagers to build a small house on a small piece of land in their own villages or other available village lands assigned by the government once within their lifetime. Although a policy was established to facilitate land acquisition for urban development, such entitlement drastically transformed the collective management of land in the countryside, as it fragmented the village association's authority in favour of a system that encouraged individual wealth over collective well-being. This solidified the idea that land or other spatial tangible assets are primarily individually owned rather than communal endeavours.

As urban development expanded throughout the New Territories in the 1980s and 1990s, real estate speculation and subsequent high prices further exacerbated the impact of the Small House Policy (小型屋宇政策), which led to increased inequality among local villagers. In many cases, the fair management of land owned by Tso Tong became extremely challenging, as its high value tended to cause disagreement among stakeholders. Originally intended to be a collection of land designated for communal purposes or common goods for the village, Tso Tong were founded not only to transmit property rights to descendants of the same clan but also to serve as associations uniting their members and honouring their ancestors Legislative Council (LegCo n.d.). Today, the properties owned by Tso Tong are often areas of dispute rather than opportunities for collective efforts to manage common assets, and they are rather stagnant, as stakeholders prioritise their self-interest and struggle to reach an agreement.

Individualised ownership is detrimental to village communities. Village culture relies on trust-building and collective agreement—two attributes that are vital to commoning because they emphasise costewardship and comanagement. However, the individual ownership of spatial tangible assets does not promote such qualities. The current ownership framework lacks the infrastructure to foster costewardship, comanagement, and mechanisms for building trust, as it does not require any form of collective agreement.

3.3 Ecological conservation

The establishment of the *Country Parks Ordinance* (Cap. 208, https://oelawhk.lib.hku.hk/items/show/2855) in 1976 further exacerbated the contrast between developed and underdeveloped areas, thus worsening inequalities among local communities. While villages near New Towns benefitted from high land value and compensation, those located within the country parks became remote pockets of private land known as enclaves. Although country parks offer leisure landscapes for urban dwellers and ecological sanctuaries for endangered species, they have contributed to the physical disappearance of traditional rural commons. The landscapes surrounding villages, which were once considered natural resources of rural communities, are now off-limit areas. Moreover, villagers' stewardship of their surrounding environment was transferred to the HKSAR Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, green groups, and other government-related agencies, effectively alienating local communities. As the common assets originally shared among villagers diminished, initiatives and efforts to establish and maintain common resources, such as hydrological infrastructure and pathways, also significantly disappeared.

In recent decades, the establishment of the Outline Zoning Plan (OZP) as a guiding principle for the use of land located within enclaves sparked another round of disputes in which villagers felt that their rights to access and manage the land had infringed. They believe that the scope of what they can control in terms of their resources has shrunk.

3.4 The rise of green groups

With the rise of environmentalism in the second half of the 20th century, awareness of and commitment to safeguarding ecologically sensitive areas became the prevailing agenda in contemporary countryside matters. At the same time, with rapid urban development, very few landscapes have remained intact. Green groups took action by spotlighting abandoned villages as sites of high ecological value and promoting the need to conserve them. Green groups' interests are sometimes incompatible with the 'cultural' and 'traditional' practices of villages, but their professional knowledge and expertise in ecology and sustainability often make them more successful in bidding for government funding. This situation is further exacerbated by two factors. First, many villagers no longer have the local skills to manage the landscape, either because they left the villages when they were too young to learn or because there is no need to work on

the land to make a living. Second, the increasing expectations and demand for ecological conservation from the general public favour the agenda of green groups. While green groups should be appreciated for their efforts to safeguard and protect local ecologies, they contribute to decommoning factors by taking away villagers' stewardship role. For example, villagers from So Lo Pun emphasised the difficulties they encountered when attempting to modify their own village landscapes due to widespread monitoring and reporting from 'environmentalists' (Wong, J., and Wong, H. C., personal interview, May 23, 2022). Nevertheless, others have recognised the benefits of working with green groups and leveraged their expertise in ecological conservation to revitalise their villages. Sha Lo Tung Greenfield, for example, is a company established by Sha Lo Tung Lei Uk (李屋) villagers to partner with the NPO, Green Power. Green Power was officially recognised to manage the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) through a management agreement with the government to pursue ecological conservation. Sha Lo Tung Lei Uk partnered with the green group to carry out their smart agriculture project, on which the two groups collaborated (Li, H. M., and Chan, personal interview, June 22, 2022). In this attempt, the mode of collaboration fosters new stakeholder roles. Villagers are no longer the sole keeper of the village landscape, but they comanage it with a green group. The type and number of stakeholders who can be included in the commons have expanded.

The involvement of NPOs and philanthropic funding bodies in village revitalisation is seen as a decommoning factor because they are considered third parties that are trying to become involved in village matters. They are criticised for applying an external expert-oriented approach to countryside matters that contrasts with the traditional internal clanship management approach and for making villagers rely on funding support from outside sources, which is contrary to the traditional commoning mechanisms of crowdfunding for self-financing within or among villages. Ultimately, these new modes of collaboration provoke reviews of what a commons means and who is at stake and can become involved.

4 Recent conservation and revitalisation initiatives

After reviewing the historical development of commons and examining the major decommoning factors leading to the current situation, this section applies the concept of *re-commonisation* as developed by Jeong (2018) to analyse the process of village revitalisation in Hong Kong and address the shortcomings experienced by some villagers. We selected cases from four villages (Fig. 2)—Kau Sai (滘西), Po Toi (蒲台), So Lo Pun, and Yung Shue Au (榕树凹)—to illustrate various levels of adaptation and resilience to current societal and economic transformations and the intertwining relationship between (re)commoning and village heritage. While some initiatives consist of conserving past commoning practices and their associated commons, others focus on transforming old commons into new ones or creating newly defined commons, which we propose to study as new forms of recommoning. By examining these cases, we can analyse the successes and limitations of the (re)commoning process in achieving, supporting, or hindering village revitalisation and demonstrate Hong Kong's relevance to global contemporary trends in commoning studies.

4.1 Conserving symbolic commons

Kau Sai and Po Toi are two fishing villages in Hong Kong that have experienced depopulation due to the decline of the fishery industry since the 1960s and 1970s. However, both communities have managed to maintain their interclanship bonds through the continuous worship of their deities during regular events and annual festivals. Both villages have temples dedicated to their deities, and the preservation and ongoing management of these built heritage sites provide an opportunity for villagers to sustain their commoning practices. Their respective symbolic commons have kept their communities united.

In the case of Kau Sai, Hung Shing (洪圣) has been important to the villagers' daily lives because he is the god of the fishermen (Fig. 4). Even after the villagers moved away, they returned to the Hung Shing Old Temple for regular worship. This temple, as a spatial tangible asset, has become a physical symbol of unity for villagers, reinforcing their community bonds and motivating them to continue their traditional commoning practice through the associational commons of the Kau Sai Village Committee (滘西村委员会). In the 1990s, the Hong Kong Jockey Club worked together with the HKSAR

Fig. 4 Hung Shing Festival in Kau Sai on 4 March 2023 (Source: the authors)

Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) to sponsor the restoration of Kau Sai's Hung Shing Old Temple as a result of the construction of the Jockey Club Kau Chau Public Golf Course north of the village. Subsequently, in 2000, the temple received the UNESCO Asia–Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation, and the AMO declared the temple a monument in 2002. (Antiquities and Monuments Office n.d.) These external parties' efforts to preserve the Hung Shing Old Temple as a built heritage and its subsequent heritage award and recognition as a listed monument emphasise the importance of the temple's significance as a symbolic commons and urge villagers to continue their ongoing efforts to maintain and preserve it. Presently, the villagers themselves serve as caretakers of the Hung Shing Old Temple, ensuring that it is regularly maintained and managed.

Similarly, in Po Toi, villagers worship Tin Hau (天后), the goddess of the sea (Fig. 5). One significant village annual event is the celebration of Tin Hau's birthday, which occurs in March according to the Lunar calendar. During this event, a large-scale traditional bamboo structure is temporarily constructed to host Cantonese opera performances. Both the Tin Hau Temple and the event-based bamboo structure serve as physical symbolic commons, as they bring the villagers together. Whether through participation in the management of the event or simply enjoying and celebrating the culture, these communal spaces foster unity among the villagers. These events and festivals associated with the worship of Tin Hau are organised by the Po Toi Island Welfare Association (蒲台岛值理会), an associational commons that remains active despite most villagers having moved away. This association also recently took the lead in the self-sponsored renovation project of Tin Hau Temple.

Fig. 5 Tin Hau Temple in Po Toi (Source: the authors)

In both cases, tangible assets hold value in relation to the worship of local deities during periodic events throughout the year. Such symbolic commons remain more or less the same as how they were celebrated in the old days, with some adaptations made in every generation as the traditions are passed on. However, they gradually became isolated and detached from villagers' everyday lives. Both villages lack a sustainable means of a fishery-based livelihood, so many villagers now live and work elsewhere in the city.

Their continuing commoning practices being focused only on their symbolic commons may explain why Po Toi and Kau Sai have yet to be revitalised. Referring to the three types of commons mentioned earlier (production, associational, and symbolic commons), these two cases highlight the need for interdependence and interconnectedness among them to achieve a more sustainable community. While associational commons, such as the respective village associations, manage and organise events related to the celebration and recognition of symbolic commons, what may be missing is a functional production commons that would keep the village as an active and regular living and working community rather than solely dependent on festivities. After all, the worship of Hung Shing and Tin Hau is connected to the practice of fishing. in the absence of a livelihood dependent on fishing, the worship of these local deities may become a symbol of the past rather than being relevant today. However, transforming old production commons into new ones presents its own challenges. The future relevance of religious built heritage will depend on whether a sustainable community can be revitalised to connect the three types of commons.

4.2 Revitalising private property

As seen in the decommoning section, the fragmentation of ownership challenges the implementation of commoning practices. Thus, this fragmentation has severely impacted many recent revitalisation initiatives. For example, the Countryside Conservation Funding Scheme (CCFS) has been one of the major sources of funding for village revitalisation since 2018. Its funding mechanism expects NPOs, institutions or organisations to collaborate with private landowners to pursue revitalisation projects. While this approach is legitimate because it follows current land ownership laws, it assumes that villagers' participation is based on individual interests rather than considering the village as a collective unit. According to communications with the Countryside Conservation Office (CCO), this approach aims to spark individual-level revitalisation initiatives that can ultimately have a larger impact on the village. However, one aspect that CCFS might have overlooked is that villagers,

as a community, do not see how external funding that primarily benefits individual property interests can effectively help them. Conceptually, there is a contradiction between how the village community perceives itself as a unified entity and the individual basis on which each villager needs to collaborate with outsiders to receive funding support through CCFS. Villagers indicate that there is a fundamental cultural difference between how the government administratively frames countryside management and how village communities collaborate and work together.

Returning to the case of Lai Chi Wo, one of the recent revitalisation projects is the 'Hakka Life Experience Village' (客家生活体验村) by the Hong Kong Countryside Foundation (HKCF), which receives significant funding from the Hong Kong Jockey Club and is supported by the CCFS. The overall vision of the project is to develop educational tourism as a sustainable social enterprise in Lai Chi Wo. It aims to repurpose several vacant village houses into accommodation facilities for members of the public interested in Hakka culture, allowing them to stay overnight and learn about traditional rural living. Apart from considerations of the current structural condition and feasibility of converting houses, the main challenge lies in obtaining the cooperation of individual house owners. The HKCF project team has proposed using the house for 20 years and covering the renovation costs. The owners can have the right to use the house for a certain time per year during this 20-year agreement and will resume full access to the property when this agreement expires.

Due to the fragmentation of ownership, in the initial liaison phase, the HKCF project team had to approach and negotiate with each house owner individually instead of discussing with the villagers as a collective. This approach raised concerns and scepticism about the fairness of the arrangement. For example, some villagers did not understand the selection criteria and questioned why certain houses were invited to participate while others were not. Those residing abroad were particularly concerned because they lacked first-hand information. Consequently, differing opinions about the scheme created divisions among villagers instead of uniting them around a common goal. As a close-knit village community, stories about family disagreements regarding participation in the project spread quickly. Since only specific houses were selected for renovation, some villagers viewed the outside funding with mistrust and believed it caused unnecessary tensions and harmed collective cohesion and family relationships.

In short, such an approach views and administers built heritage (in the form of everyday village houses) as private property and facilitates individual rather than collective actions in revitalisation. Thus, it has in turn become a hindering factor to use commoning as a means for village revitalisation.

4.3 Recommoning agriculture

While intangible heritage, such as the worship of deities and the celebration of festivals, is preserved through the continuation of symbolic and associational commons, we have seen that the restoration of everyday built heritage through commoning is hindered by current property laws and government funding mechanisms that favour individual ownership. However, the revitalisation of agriculture in Hong Kong rural villages, although a traditional common, can be understood as a form of recommoning. Building on the Nayak and Berkes decommoning process, Young Sin Jeong proposed the concept of re-commonisation. Thinking about a conceptual framework to study social change based on commons, he questions 'our understanding of the changes in commons in modern society'. He believes that 'we should leave behind the notion that commons are the inherited legacy of pre-modern society, and therefore exist only within a limited scope and underdeveloped conditions'. In the current capitalist and modern economic context, he observes that commons are being 'formed and reformed to satisfy the needs of the public in modern daily life' (Jeong 2018, 175). 'Re-commonisation', he writes, 'refers to the process through which the relationships between humans and nature and between humans and resources are reconstructed to be more cooperative and ecological so that commons are reconstructed'. In other words, 'the concept of re-commonisation indicates the social process to restore the relationship between commons and communities severed due to the absence of commoning' (Jeong 2018, 178).

This is what we observe in the Hong Kong cases of recultivating abandoned farmland. Numerous villagers vividly remember agricultural activities during their time in the village. To them, recultivation holds symbolic value and serves as a representative act to revive village life and traditional rural practices reminiscent of the old days. Whether it is a romanticised pursuit or for productivity, we noticed that recultivation successfully restores the cultural value of the landscape, yielding local produce and inspiring new ways of rural living.

The revitalisation of Lai Chi Wo illustrates how recultivation plays a prominent role in engaging and communicating with local villagers. Contrary to the historic practices whereby farms in traditional Chinese communities were often managed within families or clanships, in Lai Chi Wo, a new expanded community is needed to transform its production commons. As a collaborator of the Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme, the HKCF

rented agricultural land from local owners and partnered with other NGOs to establish leadership programmes for members of the public interested in exploring new rural lifestyles, allowing them to join and receive training. This process is similar to the case of village pastures on Jeju Island, South Korea, where Jeong observes that 'although pastures exist as a resource, there are no livestock farming activities' (Jeong 2018, 177). According to him, the restoration of these pastures depends on 'whether village members or farm association members can reinvent a method of (re)communing the pastures as commons'. In other words, it is based on whether they can convert 'commons without commoning' into 'commons with commoning' (Jeong 2018, 178). Similarly, the recultivation initiative in Lai Chi Wo helps build a network consisting of villagers, NPO practitioners, and interested volunteers for day-to-day operations and farming-related coordination, effectively re-establishing a commoning network similar to those established in the past to manage production commons. Through such recultivation efforts, we observe a new phenomenon, a shift of emphasis in which each individual member's contribution to the management of agricultural land is valued. Currently, the recultivation of agricultural lands in Lai Chi Wo has been ongoing for more than a decade (Fig. 6). What started as an experiment to study the growth patterns and adaptability of different species has evolved into social enterprises that process and sell agricultural produce in local farmers' markets.

In contrast, the nearby village of So Lo Pun (Fig. 1), which also attempted recultivation as a means of revitalisation, has yet to be successful. The villagers, wary of external collaboration and funding, have been striving within their own clanship to restore their agricultural land independently, including fishponds and farmland restorations, with several failed attempts in 1970, 1974, and 2007. They created their own financing mechanism, successfully managing a pool of shared funds gathered from wealthier villagers and community crowd funding. In 2007, they established the So Lo Pun Village Committee (锁罗盆村委员会) and established the Agricultural, Fisheries and Animal Husbandry (渔农牧业组) within this committee (Wong, J., and Wong, H. C., personal interview, May 23, 2022). The revival of tangible assets in this way provides an opportunity for uniting the village community.

Fig. 6 Re-cultivation in the early days of Lai Chi Wo's revitalisation, photo taken in 2014 (Source: the authors)

Through these two cases, we observed that the revitalisation of agriculture has led to the expansion of social networks. From the perspective of commoning, the involvement of a greater spectrum of stakeholders makes the community more inclusive, as diverse thoughts and knowledge are mobilised to strive for a more robust future. For example, the HKU CCSG organised Rural Community Development Leadership Training Programmes in 2014 and 2015 for interested people to develop rural revitalisation skill sets and to foster their leadership (Policy for Sustainability Lab, Centre for Civil Society and Governance, The University of Hong Kong (CCSG, HKU) n.d.). A 3 Dous Incubation Scheme was also established for those who are keen to initiate their own farming works in Lai Chi Wo.

However, this also presents challenges, as the definition of community and the inclusion of individuals in the commons may differ between local villagers and NPOs. Local village communities are often traditionally formed based on family ties and clanships, which are closely intertwined with the management of the commons. Even though many villagers no longer reside in the villages, these relationships still hold strong. Their exclusive definition of community is now being challenged by new forms of collective associations that reflect contemporary trends. Indeed, many members of the public aspire to contribute to countryside matters and consider themselves active participants in the revitalisation of Hong Kong's villages. Basically, although this was not intended as a commoming approach, it has created opportunities for new forms of commoning today around agricultural heritage. The new perspectives of built heritage as cultural landscapes brought by new community members also foster the transformation of old versions of commons to new ones in the context of reviving agriculture, supporting the act of commoning in achieving village revitalisation.

4.4 Lessons learned

As we have seen, in some cases, the keeping of old commons because of their heritage and cultural values has become a supporting factor in facilitating (re)commoning by bringing villagers together. In Po Toi and Kau Sai, this pattern was evident in the management and conservation

of temples associated with local deities as symbolic commons through the continuation of traditional commoning practices. However, in So Lo Pun, the aspiration of reviving old farmlands as production commons brought villagers together and encouraged them to set up new associational commons on top of existing ones to manage their recultivation attempts.

However, some of the shortcomings of these approaches need to be addressed. In Po Toi and Kau Sai, the prevailing importance of old symbolic commons may overwhelm the overall village revitalisation efforts, as it draws much of the villagers' attention and energy towards its associated built heritage, such as temples and shrines. Furthermore, the unchanging nature of these symbolic commons seems increasingly unrelated to the need for contemporary rural communities to build a comprehensive foundation for future village living. In Lai Chi Wo, while individual village houses are restored and managed, village houses are not viewed as commons in this process (since they are privately owned), hence hindering the possibility of achieving holistic revitalisation through commoning.

Through the transformations of old to new production commons in the cases of Lai Chi Wo and So Lo Pun, their respective recommoning approaches also reflect two phenomena. In So Lo Pun, recommoning efforts are limited to clan membership and strengthening trust-building among villagers, but the actual recultivation initiatives have failed since they do not have the necessary farming skills. In contrast, Lai Chi Wo renewed their definition of village community through the process of recommoning new and transformed production commons. Based on individual interests and expertise, an expanded community of former villagers, NPO practitioners, and interested volunteers was formed, demonstrating the success of recommoning to revitalise village heritage in Hong Kong.

5 Reflecting on built heritage through (re) commoning

This section reflects on the unique opportunities and profound challenges of village revitalisation in Hong Kong through the lens of (re)commoning. Based on the four case studies presented in the previous section, we explore the struggles and successes of redefining built heritage as communal property, fostering community-driven common assets, initiatives to preserve indigenous knowledge, and the transformative potential of new forms of knowledge commons. These reflections are framed within the broader context of socioeconomic changes, legal constraints, and the theoretical development of (re)commoning practices. Drawing parallels with international examples, our analysis aims to provide insights into how villages can use (re)commoning as a way to leverage their cultural and historical assets to foster sustainable community development and enhance social cohesion.

5.1 The limits of built heritage as symbolic commons

Celebrating the collective value of built heritage offers both benefits and challenges. On the one hand, the broader society's respect for and cherishment of built heritage validate villagers' efforts to preserve and manage these assets. On the other hand, demographic changes such as depopulation and disinterest among younger generations leave only a handful of villagers responsible for this upkeep. This responsibility demands substantial resources, attention, and energy. Although village associations promote broader revitalisation efforts, through our fieldwork and community engagement activities, we learned that they depend heavily on external support and are often unable to leverage their skills in commoning due to an overwhelming and intensive focus on maintaining built heritage sites dedicated to the worship of local deities. This narrow focus complicates their ability to apply these skills to other communal tasks. Our project aimed to enhance commoning practices to support broader village revitalisation, but deeply ingrained views of built heritage as primarily belonging to symbolic commons have made it challenging to redirect these collective efforts towards new forms of commoning, thus impeding the transformation of old commons into new ones.

Viewing heritage through the lens of commoning reveals a tendency to prioritise structures of cultural significance—such as standalone buildings or shrines—while neglecting everyday spaces and landscapes, which are crucial to the social fabric of communities. This skewed focus is exacerbated by uneven resource allocation by administrative authorities, leading to well-maintained heritage sites surrounded by deteriorating environments. For example, since there is a lack of transportation infrastructure[2] in Kau Sai (Fig. 7), the restored Hung Shing Old Temple is accessible only by chartered boat,[3] making regular visits challenging even to the villagers who have moved out. Similarly, the renovated Tin Hau Temple in Po Toi (Fig. 5), located at the end of a difficult path, is inaccessible to elderly people and those who need barrier-free access.[4] These examples highlight

[2] Kau Sai villagers have been requesting a proper pier and a regular kaito ferry service for over 20 years.

[3] At the time of writing this paper, a temporary kaito ferry service is available during the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival (西贡海艺术节) between November 2023 to January 2024 specifically for this event only. Future continuation of the kaito ferry service is uncertain.

[4] Po Toi villagers have been requesting government assistance in creating a barrier-free access between their pier and the Tin Hau Temple.

Fig. 7 Resource mapping exercise conducted in Kau Sai on 11 Oct 2022 (Source: the authors)

Fig. 8 Abandoned houses in Yung Shue Au (Source: the authors)

Fig. 9 Resource mapping exercise conducted in Yung Shue Au on 28 February 2023 (Source: the authors)

the broader need for infrastructure that supports the sustainability of rural communities. The stringent rules that regulate the transformation and expansion of new commons further fragment conservation efforts, focusing only on isolated architectural elements without considering social sustainability and the broader necessity to maintain a vibrant, everyday community.

The case of Candirejo in Java, Indonesia, which is near the UNESCO site of Borobudur Temple, demonstrates that it is possible to achieve social sustainability at the village level while conserving significant standalone heritage sites. Facing the threats and pressures of mass tourism since the listing of the UNESCO site in 1983, Candirejo launched a village-scale pilot project in 2003 to transform these challenges into opportunities for physical, economic, and social development (Fatimah 2018; Fatimah and Kanki 2008, 2009). This proactive approach suggests that with time, communities such as Kau Sai and Po Toi, along with their administrative bodies, might follow suit, adopting similar strategies to evolve and enrich their commons. The success of such transformations hinges on recognising built heritage as a collective community asset rather than as an isolated architectural element.

5.2 Villagers' initiatives to identify new 'common assets'

Drawing from the cautionary tale of Lai Chi Wo, nearby villagers remained sceptical of the revitalisation initiatives proposed by external parties, reflecting deep-seated concerns about the potential erosion of clan-based trust systems. Our fieldwork in So Lo Pun highlights this dynamic, showing that trust within clanship is paramount and typically affirmed through transparent, majority-supported decision-making processes. Nonetheless, a significant challenge of navigating ownership fragmentation while preserving traditional values and collective governance persists. Indeed, similar to Lai Chi Wo, the land in So Lo Pun is individually owned, yet no single villager undertakes revitalisation alone, adhering instead to a communal direction. This balancing act between individual and collective interests is critical for the success of commoning within a legal framework that largely favours individual rights. Presently, villagers focus on identifying new 'common assets'[5]: elements of built heritage that embody shared cultural identities or symbolic meanings. Notably, these assets are often located on government land, simplifying consensus formation among villagers. Many of So Lo Pun's former inhabitants share a common educational background at Kai Ming Village School (启明学校), a site donated by their ancestors to the British colonial government. These shared memories and oral histories not only make the school an important symbolic common but also a 'common asset', as defined earlier. By identifying it as such, villagers have begun to reconceptualise their heritage, planning to transform the school into a community hub for both local and visitor engagement. Although these plans are still conceptual, they represent a proactive shift towards communal management of heritage sites, diverging from traditional private property approaches.

Similarly, in Yung Shue Au (Fig. 8), villagers are identifying their own 'common assets' that are not on private property and that hold collective memories and symbolic value. Through organised community engagement and discussions (Fig. 9), they have articulated a desire to transform two sites: the old Pui Man Village School (培文学校) and a former barrack built by the British to monitor illegal immigration into Hong Kong.[6] These sites are to be transformed into communal spaces that celebrate local and military history, respectively.

[5] 'Common assets' here refer to symbolic association to the built heritage but not property ownership.

[6] Many villagers recall the presence of British soldiers in their village when they still lived there, which constituted a unique experience in their childhood.

By designating these historically significant sites on government land as 'pioneer sites' for revitalisation, villagers navigate the sensitive issue of favouring a member's privately owned land. This approach not only fosters trust and collective decision-making but also circumvents some of the major challenges posed by the current economic and legal constraints in Hong Kong. Moreover, this approach represents a counternarrative to the individualistic restoration of private property, which can undermine communal values by introducing capitalist dynamics into heritage valuation (Jeong 2018). However, the process of negotiating with administrative authorities for the use of 'common assets' on government land is not unprecedented. For example, in Ängersjö, Sweden, the village association successfully negotiated with the local government to utilise a closed school building for community purposes, maintaining its symbolic significance while sharing responsibilities for its upkeep (Sandström et al. 2017, 518). This model of shared custodianship may encourage other villages to consider broader societal benefits and expand their community definitions to include wider interests.

However, since most 'common assets' are located on government land, new challenges regarding individual responsibility and communal investment emerge. The key question is the extent of effort and dedication required from each villager in the administrative processes needed to utilise these sites effectively. This situation tests villagers' ability to adhere to the principles and ideology of commoning, where achieving consensus through collective decision-making and maintaining trust are paramount. In Ängersjö, Sweden, for example, the negotiation with the local government over a closed village school exemplifies a successful model of shared responsibilities: the local government retains ownership and manages maintenance, while the village association handles daily utility costs (Sandström et al. 2017, 518). This partnership has effectively expanded the community, fostering a shared sense of responsibility and trust between the villagers and the local government. Such collaborations can redefine communal efforts, ensuring that the future use of these sites aligns with the public good and reflects the expanded community's interests and needs.

Working on government land provides villagers an opportunity to redefine their community boundaries. In Ängersjö and similar cases, this arrangement allows local villagers to expand their notion of community, considering broader societal interests and needs. This aspect of communal expansion is crucial for promoting a holistic approach to village revitalisation that benefits all stakeholders involved. The proactive identification of 'common assets' by villagers should therefore be viewed as the beginning of a broader commoning process. While these initiatives have yet to fully materialise, the potential for their success could be significantly enhanced by more supportive land and building regulations that align with the villages' revitalisation goals and respect for communal heritage.

5.3 New forms of knowledge commons

The agricultural revitalisation initiatives that were outlined previously highlight the importance of specialised knowledge for the successful renewal and commoning of tangible assets. A major challenge in Hong Kong's village revitalisation efforts is the preservation of indigenous knowledge, particularly as many villagers who left in the 1960s and 1970s lost the opportunity to learn essential farming skills from their elders.

In So Lo Pun, the lack of farming expertise led villagers to fund external teams for recultivation. Unfortunately, these efforts were unsustainable; the teams were small, lacked agricultural knowledge, and did not reside in the village, limiting ongoing maintenance and management of these revived commons. In contrast, in Lai Chi Wo, the loss of indigenous knowledge provided an impetus for innovative collaboration, broadening the community's scope and facilitating the exploration of new commoning methodologies. The villagers partnered with NGOs, ecologists, and agricultural experts to develop an irrigation system that met contemporary ecological standards. This cooperative venture not only transformed old commons into new forms but also integrated diverse community members and expertise into a robust commoning network. A similar expansion of community knowledge commons can be observed in Seonheul 1-ri, South Korea, where villagers, environmentalists, and newcomers formed a Conservation and Management Council to comanage the Dongbaek-Dongsan forest. This council facilitates an exchange of ecological knowledge, creating a dynamic platform for managing natural resources collectively. As Stephan Meretz (2012) notes, a feature that is unique to emerging commons compared to traditional ones is the possibility of being universally connected. Indeed, the case of the recultivation of Lai Chi Wo supports Jeong's observation that 'in the case of 'emerging commons, which are newly created in an environment hostile to commons, dominated by the control logic of the state and the profit-making logic of capital, the boundaries between user groups are often open or unclear, and the boundaries of resources are also uncertain' (Jeong 2018, 181).

However, the creation of knowledge commons for village revitalisation may not always impact built heritage directly. Initiatives such as those by Ms. Jane Wong, who in 2023 published a history of So Lo Pun Village《沙头角庆春约·锁罗盆村沿革史》(*Sha Tou Kok Hing Chun Yeuk: The History of So Lo Pun Village*), exemplify the documentation of local traditions and histories, enriching the community's cultural tapestry. Although not directly

linked to the physical revitalisation of assets, such knowledge commons play a critical role in preserving and sharing intangible cultural elements, ensuring that they are not lost to future generations. These diverse approaches to fostering knowledge commons highlight the need for a broad, inclusive perspective on managing and conserving rural built heritage. The successful integration of both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage will be crucial for the sustainability of these practices. Looking forward, knowledge commons should aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of built heritage, demonstrating how physical spaces and cultural narratives are interconnected and collectively valued by the community.

6 Conclusion

The revitalisation of rural villages in Hong Kong presents a multifaceted challenge that hinges on a nuanced understanding of built heritage. The cases of Lai Chi Wo, So Lo Pun, Kau Sai, and Po Toi presented in this article illustrate diverse interpretations of built heritage and varying approaches to commoning, revealing both opportunities and obstacles in the process.

One of the critical insights from these case studies is the role of symbolic commons, particularly in the context of traditional religious practices. The conservation of associated built heritage, such as temples, often becomes the focal point of ongoing commoning efforts. However, this emphasis, which largely results from statutory regulations and official definitions of heritage, can exhaust community resources and limit broader revitalisation efforts. Paradoxically, these same strict regulations, while providing a framework for conservation, can also encourage communities to define their own rules and mechanisms, fostering a unique form of recommoning.

The identification and transformation of 'common assets' on government land, as seen in So Lo Pun and Yung Shue Au, offer a promising approach to bypassing the challenges posed by individual property rights. These initiatives highlight the importance of communal decision-making and the potential for broader societal benefits. However, they also challenge the ability of their respective communities to maintain trust and invest collectively in the face of administrative obstacles.

The loss of indigenous knowledge presents another significant challenge but also opens the door for reconstructing knowledge that aligns with contemporary conservation needs. The integration of external expertise with local traditions facilitates a re-evaluation of community boundaries and expands the scope of commoning practices. This dynamic is evident in the successful agricultural revitalisation efforts in Lai Chi Wo, where collaboration with NGOs and experts has created a robust commoning network. Conversely, the struggles faced by So Lo Pun highlight the difficulties of relying solely on traditional clan-based structures without the necessary agricultural skills.

Overall, the interplay between built heritage and commoning practices in village revitalisation projects is complex and multifaceted. It involves balancing statutory regulations, community interpretations, and the preservation of both tangible and intangible heritage elements. The process of recommoning, whether it involves holding onto old commons or transforming them into new ones, significantly impacts the effectiveness of village revitalisation efforts. By fostering a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of community and heritage, these initiatives can leverage cultural and historical assets for sustainable development and enhanced social cohesion.

Abbreviations

NPO	Non-profit Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
CCSG	Centre for Civil Society and Governance
HKU	University of Hong Kong
HSBC	Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
LegCO	Legislative Council of the HKSAR
HKSAR	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
OZP	Outline Zoning Plan
AMO	Antiquities and Monuments Office
CCFS	Countryside Conservation Funding Scheme
CCO	Countryside Conservation Office
HKCF	Hong Kong Countryside Foundation

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Ethics approval and consent to participate
All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. The anonymity and confidentially of the participants were guaranteed, and participation was completely voluntary.

Consent for publication
Most of the people appear in the photos have signed the consent forms for publication, except for some who wearing masks whose faces can't be identified. The consent form states that their images will be freely available on the internet and may be seen by the general public.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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