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‘Something more, something better, something else, is needed’

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Introduction

‘Every ideology contains a utopia’ (Sargent 2006: 12). As epitomised in the 2017 Policy Address of the Chief Executive in Hong Kong: ‘We believe that only through economic development can we improve people’s livelihood and promote social harmony and inclusion’ (Government of Hong Kong 2017: 1). The Policy Address continues to boast of Hong Kong being the world’s freest economy for 22 consecutive years (Heritage Foundation 2017); the city’s dual advantages as the ‘super-connector’ between China and the world under China’s renewed Belt and Road Initiative (to expand global trade and cultural exchanges); and the one country, two systems arrangements for capitalist Hong Kong to be ruled by socialist China. However, this ‘utopian’ economic picture is perhaps true only for certain sectors in Hong Kong – the self-crowned ‘Asian World City’ is very much a polarised society. According to the UNDP, Hong Kong ranked as the most polarised society (Cagape 2009), and in 2011 Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient (to measure wealth disparity) was 0.54 (Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS 2017) (a score of 0.5 or more is considered high i.e. showing high wealth inequality). In 2014 almost 20 per cent of the population were considered poor (South China Morning Post [SCMP 2015]), and depending on who you ask, Hong Kong is both heaven and hell (Cagape 2009). This chapter tries to interrogate this heaven and hell reality through the lens of utopia and dystopia, highlighting how a dystopian context can trigger people’s utopia-inspired acts to defend their lived spaces. The chapter first examines the dialectical relationships of utopia and dystopia. Then the story of two communities threatened by a pro-growth ideology, defending their right to lived spaces is discussed. Their experiences reveal that the choice to produce differential spaces for nurturing relationship-rich communities has to be made on a daily basis – to enact relentlessly a utopia amidst every dystopian situation.

The dialectics of utopia and dystopia

Gordin et al. (2010: 1) argue that ‘utopias and dystopias are histories of the present’. To them, dystopia is a utopia gone wrong or one that functions only for a particular segment of society. A
Dystopian utopia? Utopian dystopia?
dystopia emerges when the dominant groups apply their (utopian) visions and hegemonic solutions to resolve society’s ‘perceived deficiencies’ (Gunder and Hillier 2007: 467). The hegemonic rule of the dominant groups in this age of planetary urbanisation (their utopia) unfortunately is often serviced by ‘scientists, technicians, administrators, physicians and soldiers’ (Mumford 1965: 289) whose knowledge becomes an ideological tool to ‘prove’ the impossibility of alternative urbanisms. Hence, everyday life as well as the institutional set-up of such a faulty or dystopian utopia is permeated with ideological qualities, twisting the dreams of many, limiting their lives, leaving them with few options (Stillman 2003: 15). Spaces created in a dystopian utopia can for Lefebvre be spaces of: catastrophe, violently produced by exploitation, inequality, class domination, environmental degradation, stultification and oppression, homogenising, universalising and totalising. The pursuit of economic competitiveness and profit is seen as ‘progress’ even though the erosion of use values in space has threatened the well-being of every territory-bounded urbanite. If this is the case, how can people realise that they are indeed living in a faulty or dystopian utopia? As argued by Lefebvre, ‘the silence of the “users” [of space] is indeed a problem’ (1991: 364). Will these silent users be awakened and start to voice the conditions of their dire reality?

Wilson and Bayon provide an answer using ‘the black hole capitalism metaphor’ (2016: 352). While planetary urbanisation razes the planet, turning it into ‘an infernal machine’ for ‘endless valorisation of value’ (Jameson 2011 in Wilson and Bayon 2016: 354–5), at the ‘border of oblivion’ where the annihilation of space is swallowing up all possible hope, people directly affected may then perceive for the first time their ‘nightmarish reality’, coercing them to make a desperate decision to re-assert their equal rights to planet Earth, thus forging the birth of a real utopia of differentiated spaces (Wilson and Bayon 2016: 357, 362). In other words, when people recognise the real face of a hegemonic utopia as dystopia, they will begin to search for their own utopia in the midst of the dystopian contexts that hopefully will lead them to real alternative possibilities (Bloch 1986: 223).

Interestingly, these ‘awakening’ moments, if they ever take place, are often preceded by utopian work done by ‘enlightened elites’ who, as argued by Lefebvre (1991: 51), always lead the protests even though they should be the privileged ones in planetary urbanisation. Ng (2014: 3) calls these ‘enlightened elites’ ‘system-transforming intellectuals’ (these could be ‘sympathetic insiders’ within the government or ‘critical experts’ in civil society) who help ‘re-problematise or re-conceptualise existing situations to provide directions for changing cultural and habitual practices’. Ng (2016: 282–3) further suggests that in the Chinese culture, intellectuals usually are expected to be loyal to a functioning system. However, if the system is corrupt, it is the calling of intellectuals to criticise it boldly and educate the ‘common people’, encouraging them to undertake utopian acts of righteousness and benevolence.

Whether by system-transforming intellectuals or crisis-ridden awakening communities, the enactment of a utopian dystopia can be a powerful tool, inspiring ‘hopes in the darkness itself’ (Bloch 2000: 201), excavating possibilities for alternative and more just urbanisation processes (Gordin et al. 2010: 2; Macleod and Ward 2002: 164; Pinder 2002: 239). The tactic is to appropriate and activate fully the possibilities that lie hidden within the everyday ‘ordinary’ setting as active sites for the continuous removal of the dystopian reality (Brown 2011; Pinder 2010). It is to acquire once again the ability to see places as a product of ‘various interactions of people with each other and with that place’ (Brown 2011: 14), to rekindle the dream of a desirable urbanism that is open-ended, creative, shared and inherently unique (Madden 2012: 775) where ‘everyday life can flourish’ convivially (Coleman 2013: 354). These utopian acts of critiquing the present and developing ideas of the future can only happen when people come together to deliberate on what it means to create and inhabit places that are valuable to people’s lives to meet their everyday social needs (city-bound collective 2012; Sliwinski 2016: 439).
Indeed, concrete utopia (Bloch 1986: 223) – utopian places of encounters, play, work, creativity and exchange that do not pass into exchange value, commerce and profit (Lefebvre 1996: 148) but give people dignity (Bloch 1986) – sometimes can be found in urban spaces described by the hegemonic discourse as ‘dystopia’, which in fact can turn out to be ‘transgressive lived spaces of escape, refuge, employment and entertainment’ (MacLeod and Ward 2002: 164). However, it is not easy to map these utopic spaces as there is no paperwork, no law and no formalised plans but complicated ‘social property relations’ (city-bound collective 2012: 604–5). Discerning these places would require denaturalising ‘customary ways of framing and resolving social problems’ through sharing values to rebuild ‘commons’ (Sliwinski 2016: 440), commons that satisfy ‘the legitimate needs, desires and capacities of human beings’ (Gardiner 1992: 28). And this demands dialogical interaction of various stakeholders, co-endeavouring to develop mutual recognition, support and trust (Gardiner 1992: 40; Martin 2003: 732) for the building of a dedicated ‘beloved community’ (Royce 2001: 9). Lefebvre (1996: 151) calls these experimental utopias, where there is ‘incessant feedback between the conceptual framework [utopian thoughts] used and empirical observations’.

The building of a utopian dystopia, the enactment of progressive convivial spaces in a hegemonic dystopian utopia, is to transform an exchange value-dominated urban realm to one that allows all its stakeholders a right to use urban spaces and turn them into places that nourish people’s dignity. Value is indeed a social relation (Wilson and Bayon 2016: 354). It is because through the making and remaking of these experimental utopias that ‘we make a place and we construct ourselves through this making’, finding ourselves and the true meanings of our lives (Brown 2011: 15).

**Government plans (conceived space): it is all about growth…**

The pro-growth ideology as a hegemonic utopian goal intensified when Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule in 1997 because China was eager to prevent capital flight (Chu and So 2013). However, paralleling a culture that stresses the importance of economic stability and prosperity is a long history of political activism in the city (Lam 2004). For instance, from 2005 to 2014, there were 49,508 public meetings and processions, averaging 14 events per day (Ng 2016: 284). The post-colonial city has indeed faced many planning controversies in its two decades of existence (Ng 2013). The sections examine two episodes of a close encounter of dystopia and utopia in urban and rural Hong Kong.

Wanchai, an old urban area east of the Central Business District, has been facing huge (re)development pressure. Over the years, it has witnessed what Wilson and Bayon (2016) called ‘black hole capitalism’, where rows after rows of four to five-storey tenement buildings were razed to make way for high-rise luxury apartments. In the past decade many redevelopment projects, including four large-scale ones led by the Urban Renewal Authority (URA), were conducted in Wanchai, with the remaining community being pushed to the border of oblivion. As argued by Wilson and Bayon (2016: 352), a real utopia is like a black hole environment where ‘a space of wild creative energies’ meets ‘a vortex of destruction’.

In 2006, when a community-based battle against the URA redevelopment of ‘Wedding Card’ street (a street with low-rise tenement buildings and diversified design and printing shops at the ground level) was hardly over, the URA announced another HK$100 million (US$12.8 million) project to convert a grade one-listed heritage building, the Blue House, into a tourist attraction. However, the Blue House has a long history of being valued highly by the local community, serving once as: a temple, then a hospital and school. So the local community objected and put forward a counterproposal called *Living in the Living Museum*.
Dystopian utopia? Utopian dystopia?

(Lai 2006), as in 2005 they had applied to set up a ‘Wanchai Livelihood Museum’ in the Blue House.

The destructive power of black hole capitalism is also evident in the New Territories. Since China’s Open Door Policy and Hong Kong’s economic integration with the mainland, the once rural agricultural fields have become ‘container territory’ (i.e. turned into storage sites for such things as containers and construction materials). It was not until after 1990 that the urban planning rules and regulations were extended to control land-use development in the New Territories. But by then, the damage had been done.

In 2008–9, because of the global financial tsunami, China tried to stimulate its economy through the development of a high-speed railway network. In April 2008, the government of Hong Kong announced the construction of a HK$66.9 billion (US$8.6 billion) 26-km Express Rail Link (ERL). In November 2008, without prior notification or consultation, the government announced that Choi Yuen Village, a non-indigenous rural village (villages not eligible for reconstruction when resumed (acquired through compulsory purchase or eminent domain) for public purposes because their ancestors came to Hong Kong after the arrival of the British colonisers) in the New Territories, had to be removed in 2010 to make way for an emergency rescue station along the ERL. The Mass Transit Railway Corporation (MTRC) responsible for building the ERL then claimed that it would connect Hong Kong with the 16,000-km National High Speed Railway network, create 11,000 jobs, save approximately 42 million hours of travel time and gain the benefits of a much bigger economic circle (MTRC 2017). This conceived plan is full of ‘violence’ (Lefebvre 1991: 358), as it aims to annihilate the Choi Yuen Village. Not only was the ERL project met with strong societal objection, but the villagers were adamantly against the removal of their village, and very quickly the two groups joined forces to resist the implementation of the project. Before we continue with these stories, let us have a deeper understanding of the two affected communities when they faced the official plan that would exterminate their lived space.

Representational space at the ‘vortex of destruction’

With the completion of the URA’s redevelopment projects, local stakeholders started to recognise the ‘horrible’ face of the redevelopment machine. They were shocked when they learned that the redevelopment projects did not provide a continued right for them to live or earn a living in the district. Collective memories, histories and culture would be destroyed. In the name of redeveloping for the ‘public interest’, long-term residents and social networks cultivated over the years were removed (Wong 2006):

I grew up in Wanchai… I feel very safe walking on the streets… just like going home… We have invested all our money and efforts in our shop and now we are deprived of a harmonious community… this cannot be compensated by money… our sacrifice is too big. (16–17)

When the economy was bad in the 1990s, the landlord automatically lowered our rents… The Urban Renewal Authority required us to show them tenant proofs in the past two to three decades. (16–18)

When the government announced the project to revitalise the Blue House, many residents were retired elderly people who were extremely worried about the prospect of being displaced.
Cheap rent in the Blue House, old markets, street corner shops, convenient transportation networks and strong social capital meant that they could lead an affordable life (Lee 2009: 94). Given the threat of displacement, they had no choice but to work with other social activists to fight for their continued right to live in the Blue House:

> After the introduction of the official revitalization project, we have spent more time for the meeting with other locals and outsiders. In the past, we would not spend so much time chatting with neighbours. (Lee 2009: 156)

There are two classes of citizens in rural Hong Kong. The indigenous landowners (those who came before the British colonisers) are entitled to build their own houses and the reconstruction of their villages when their land is resumed for public purposes. Many indigenous villagers had turned their unused farmland into open storage or car parks. Hence, indigenous landowners usually are very happy when infrastructure projects demand the resumption of their land. These arrangements do not apply to the non-indigenous villagers, who are usually farmers, tilling land they either rent or bought from indigenous villagers, and who do not have the entitlement to a reconstructed village following the expropriation of their land by the state. As remarked by a journalist turned social activist: ‘all the fields [in non-indigenous Choi Yuen Village] have been carefully tilled… this is the only place in Shek Kong not ruined by car dumps or open warehouses’ (Chu 2009).

Choi Yuen Villagers were very angry at the imminent demise of their homes and their preferred and dignified lifestyle:

> After learning the news, my mom could not sleep… We have strong relationships in the village… Why do we need compassionate rehousing? We can move if we want to!… The kind of development embedded in the ERL is too irrelevant to me… It is development for ‘you’ [the government] at the expense of us minorities. (Ip 2009a)

> I am 80 years old and have lived here for 50 to 60 years… I cannot live in apartment buildings… When I visit my daughter in the city, I get lost… Here I can continue to grow flowers, vegetables… I need to do something… I cannot just stay at home. (Ip 2009b)

> I realised how free it is to be a farmer… When you work for others… you are seldom recognised for your contribution… much more rewarding to farm… its value is not measured only with money… It stimulates my creativity. (Lam 2009a)

**The critical roles of ‘enlightened elites’**

The two struggles might be a totally different story if not for the help of ‘enlightened elites’ or ‘transformative intellectuals’ who rendered their long-term or timely expertise to resist the encroachment of the hegemonic dystopian utopia onto the lived spaces of the two communities. In the case of Wanchai, the help has been long term. Back in 1949, Bishop Hall of the Hong Kong Anglican Church, modelling on the Settlement Movement in Oxford (Britain), set up the St. James Settlement (SJS) in Wanchai to provide poor local children with education (Lam 2009b: 5). Since then, social workers in SJS have been an indispensable voice for the local...
Dystopian utopia? Utopian dystopia?

A few months before the announcement of the Blue House revitalisation project in 2006, SJS had already applied to the Lands Department to transform the Blue House into a ‘Wanchai Livelihood Museum’, exhibiting items donated by local residents as a living record of the history of the place. The preparatory work for the launching of the Museum pulled SJS and local enthusiasts together, forming a ‘beloved community’ (Royce 2001). They organised local tours, public exhibitions and workshops to gather information and opinions of local residents.

When the revitalisation project was announced, SJS, including members of Community Cultural Concern who offer advice on community development in SJS, was instrumental in organising community members and waged a multi-front battle to save their rights to lived spaces. After consulting local stakeholders, social workers in SJS put forward the ‘Living in the Living Museum’ counterproposal, presenting the local community’s utopian vision of transforming the Blue House into their community place with spaces for living, housing resident artists, cultural workshops, community uses and social enterprises. At the same time, a ‘Blue House Conservation Group’ comprising local residents, social workers, university professors, architects and urban planners (many have been comrades in the fight against the redevelopment of Wedding Card Street) worked through the Town Planning Ordinance and managed to convince the Town Planning Board to change the land use zoning to include the residential use as flats, paving the way for residents to fight for their right to stay in the Blue House. The successful move prompted the relevant authorities to reconsider the feasibility of the revitalisation options.

The timely involvement of Heritage Hong Kong, founded in 2008 by a wealthy and socially active expatriate couple in the surveying business, was a pivotal point in reshaping the fate of the Blue House. Not only was the group willing to financially support the conservation of the Blue House, it had also exercised its network and social capital to persuade the government to pursue an alternative way of revitalising the building complex (Leung 2007).

The anti-ERL drive and the resistance movement by the Choi Yuen Villagers were fuelled also by enlightened elites in the city, and interestingly many have been comrades in various social movements in the city. According to an in-depth interview with a local leader (Ko 2014), the villagers were at first rather helpless as local councillors were not particularly helpful. The situation changed when a journalist turned social activist (he was later elected to the Legislative Council in 2016) started listening to individual villagers and writing their oral histories, which moved the villagers to accept him. Paralleling the villagers’ resistance movement was a drive to stop the construction of the expensive ERL. Many protestors were students and young adults who were called the ‘post-80s’ (born after 1980). To them, the ERL symbolised everything they opposed: expensive infrastructure for the rich, absence of genuine public engagement and unequal treatment of rural indigenous and non-indigenous villages (Lai 2010). To the post-80s, ‘neighbourhoods, heritage, countryside, traditional communities and small businesses’ have priority over economic growth and planetary urbanisation (Chan 2011).

Throughout the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council debates on funding support for the ERL, there were demonstrations outside the council building. One group even performed a ‘prostrating walk’ like the Tibetan pilgrims (walking 26 steps – symbolising the length of ERL – before kneeling down and touching the ground) in five districts and around the Legislative Council building for two days before the budget for the project was approved. On the night when the budget was finally approved, the protestors stormed and blocked all the exits of the Legislative Council building, attracting wide media attention.

One reason for the post-80s’ proactive involvement probably had to do with their encounter with rural village life (Ko 2014). For many of them, their visit to Choi Yuen Village during the campaign was eye-opening and life-transforming. As mostly urbanites, they were somehow captivated by the simple lives and warm human relationships in the village (Ko 2014).
enjoyed staying with the ‘extended families’ in the village, listening to stories told by the elderly and enjoying the village food they missed in the city. Very quickly the village became their ‘beloved community’ (Royce 2001) and their actions proved their devotion to their newly found ‘utopia’. The approval of the ERL budget meant that the village had to move, but with the help of different enlightened elites the villagers eventually decided to fight for their right to rebuild a new village to create a utopia out of a dystopia.

The fight for differential space

Ravaged by four large-scale redevelopment projects, residents in Wanchai, assisted by SJS and other social activists, gathered momentum when the saga of the Blue House revitalisation project was announced. They worked together on a counter-proposal based on not just preserving the building typology but also the environment encompassing the existing living culture and economy to promote sustainable development (SJS 2007: 3). Through bottom-up participatory planning, they aimed at conserving the original architectural character of the Blue House as a testimony to traditional developments in Hong Kong, hence: conserving community history and culture, improving liveability (for those who wanted to move out or stay), building social capital and a sense of community, developing social enterprises and preventing gentrification (SJS 2007: 4–5).

With the help of Heritage Hong Kong and other social activists, the government was persuaded to include the Blue House in the ‘Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme’ that aims at balancing conservation and development through adaptive re-use of government-owned historic buildings. In August 2009, the government invited proposals for the revitalisation of the Blue House with the condition that existing residents can continue living there. In September 2010, SJS together with Community Cultural Concern and Heritage Hong Kong won the bid. The building complex will regain its past multi-functional role as a community space for different stakeholders: existing tenants, good neighbours (tenants who are required to contribute to community building), social enterprises and spaces for promoting local community culture such as workshop spaces for learning local arts and crafts, the House of Stories, Community Currency Shop (shop to exchange services or second-hand goods) as well as an open space for local markets and community activities. It will be an oasis for rebuilding the local economy and community through the working together of local residents, SJS, social activists as well as built environment-related professionals in the rapidly gentrifying Wanchai.

The fight for their lived spaces and the quest for differential rural and farming spaces were much more eventful for Choi Yuen Village. The indigenous villagers supporting land expropriation by the government argued that they understood ‘the spirit of sacrificing oneself for the greater good of the community’ (Lam 2009c). However, when indigenous villagers ‘sacrificed’, meaning selling their land to the government, their village would be rebuilt, and they would be generously compensated. Yet, for the non-indigenous villagers, when their villages are expropriated for public purposes, they are not entitled to rebuild their homes. At the beginning, Choi Yuen Villagers adopted the ‘no move, no demolition’ strategy. However, after the funding was approved by the Legislative Council in January 2010, the Village Concern Group announced in late February 2010 that they had decided to put forward a counter-proposal to the government for ‘Rebuilding Choi Yuen Village’. Ninety households announced that they would, with the help of professionals, find land to rebuild a model eco-village so that their rural lifestyles and social networks could be continued.

Although the government does not have a policy to rebuild non-indigenous villages after land expropriation, it has a rather tokenistic ‘Agricultural Land Rehabilitation Scheme’ of allowing the re-instatement of housing and farmland when farmers are affected by infrastructure
Development. The then chairman of the Rural Council, controlled by indigenous villagers, also helped search for appropriate land for the rebuilding of Choi Yuen Village. Community Cultural Concern, the group that facilitated the Blue House project, and other social activists established the ‘Choi Yuen Village Community Building Office’ in March 2010 and recruited volunteers from different professions such as: planners, architects, landscape designers, engineers, ecologists and farmers to engage in participatory planning. Eventually a plan for ‘New Choi Yuen Eco-village’ was formulated with the principles of a car-free environment; saving 40 per cent of land for collective farming; conserving the existing cultural landscape including orchards and fish ponds; and practising water recycling. The fight for their differential lived spaces was not smooth. As of February 2017, the new Village is still not fully developed.

Conclusions: everyday utopianism in face of a dystopian utopia

Lefebvre (1991: 356) argues that ‘it is the political use of space… that does the most to reinstat e use value’. Politics exist when those who have no right exert their rights to be counted, symbolising ‘a return of the repressed’ (Žižek 1989: 55). As of February 2017, the Blue House building complex is still under renovation and its utopian vision is threatened as the district continues to gentrify with the growth of bars, high-end health shops and expensive and exclusive shopping malls for the new and affluent residents. As indicated by a local resident-volunteer (SJS 2014), they have succeeded in conserving the building cluster but Wanchai has changed and gentrified – they have fought to stay but the community has changed. After all, the pro-growth ideology has an inherent bias towards privileging the production of spaces for exchange values.

Choi Yuen Villagers’ quest for their lived spaces has been an uphill struggle in the face of the hegemonic power of the government and the indigenous villagers. The Agricultural Land Rehabilitation Scheme provides no solid policy or substantive support for infrastructure and utility development. Even though they managed to purchase land from indigenous villagers, neighbouring indigenous villagers refused to grant them road access unless they made extra payment. Because of all these difficulties, when construction costs escalated, the project was delayed, forcing them to compromise on the original ecological design (Ngo 2012). To co-build an eco-village is difficult enough, and the engagement of a less than professional contractor to save costs did not help. As of February 2017, although the New Village has not been fully developed, villagers managed to celebrate the Chinese New Year in their new homes.

The struggles to fight for their lived and differential spaces have continued to unfold. These two amazing dramas of unsung heroes and heroines point to the importance of hope and the courage to dream of utopia in the midst of a dystopian situation. These two stories testify the importance of ‘enlightened elites’ or ‘system-transforming intellectuals’ whose ‘will to truth’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 399) will not only awaken the silent space-users but also inspire them to fight with their beloved communities for their lived spaces.

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SJS (2014) Research interview, 30 May, it lasted about two hours.


