

Press Release

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PolyU Study Finds Film Can Induce Heritage Site Conservation

Film has a strong influence on the creation of tourist locations according to a recently published research article by Dr Steve Pan of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and a co-author. In a case study of how the Hong Kong media covered *Echoes of the Rainbow*, the researchers show that film, through the influence of the mass media, can induce community action and policy initiatives to promote the conservation of potential tourism-friendly cultural assets. There was, they show, considerable difference in the way the media framed the public debate surrounding the conservation of Wing Lee Street in Hong Kong's Sheung Wan before and after the film won the Crystal Bear at the 2010 Berlin Film Festival. The researchers note that there is a pressing need for Hong Kong to establish "consistent standards for conserving heritage sites rather than relying on a film to be a 'saviour'".

The power of films to attract tourists is well recognised, with a considerable body of research devoted to the area of "film tourism". Less investigated is film-induced conservation, even though the researchers note that "films can induce or reinforce a conservation movement" and "be transformed into new heritage tourism products". As it affects "local historical memory", such conservation plays a particularly important role in Hong Kong because of the space constraints on the development of new physical tourism sites. However, as the researchers makes clear, the objects "that represent local historical memory must be preserved first before tourism can be induced and developed".

The task for tourism strategists is to find a way to enhance the symbiosis between tourism and conservation, which the space constraints of the urban areas of Hong Kong render particularly complex. Key to the success of a sustainable urban tourism programme is thus an understanding of "the dynamics between brokers, locals and other key stakeholders", the researchers explain.

Wing Lee Street in Sheung Wan, one of the earliest settled areas of Hong Kong, constituted an ideal setting in which to identify the media-brokered changes that took place in the public debate surrounding and shifts in government policy towards the conservation "of old buildings to which heritage and nostalgia attributes were imputed" by a critically acclaimed film. Part of an area targeted for urban renewal in 1997, the street's twelve 1950s-era Chinese tenement buildings provided the setting for and were central to Director Alex Law's story of a 1960s shoemaker's family as told through the eyes of his young son. In *Echoes of the Rainbow*, Law arouses nostalgia for the past "to

provide a solution to the issues of everyday life” in the present and “to encourage society to aspire to a positive future”, the researchers argue.

There are two points to consider when determining the extent to which a film has enabled heritage to be conserved: whether an area actually has been conserved and whether the film in question can be shown to have had “a catalytic effect”. The researchers set out to examine how the media shaped the agenda over conserving Wing Lee Street as a heritage site, identify the most salient media frames and the changes in those frames over twelve years, and assess the implications for future tourism planning and development.

Analysing 451 relevant news reports, including 378 in Chinese and 73 in English, the researchers focused on three key periods. The first ran from January 1998, when a development project involving Wing Lee Street was first announced, to January 2007, when a lawsuit brought by the private developer was settled. A second period, from January 2007 to 21 February 2010 covered the lead up to *Echoes of the Rainbow* winning the Berlin Film Festival award. The final period covered the subsequent 33 days, culminating in the Urban Renewal Authority announcing its support in principle for the street’s total conservation.

The stakeholders of interest were the public sector (the Urban Renewal Authority and other government authorities), the private sector (property owners and tenants) and conservation groups. The researchers consider the media as the ‘broker’ in the debate.

“Architecture provides the software and hardware for a film production”, the researchers argue, thereby inducing visitors to “relive the vicarious urban experience” featured. *Echoes of the Rainbow* certainly allowed this to happen for Wing Lee Street, but the researchers find that the subsequent media coverage was even more important. In the first two periods they study the street was rarely singled out, with most relevant news reports focusing on the conflict between the URA and the private developer over the proposed renewal project, complaints by the local community and the need to preserve buildings associated with the life of Dr Sun Yat-sen.

The third period, which commenced after the film award was announced, saw a notable shift. Wing Lee Street itself was now in the limelight, conservationists no longer struggled to make their voices heard and the public increasingly supported “the preservation of the street and its role in the collective memory of the community”. Director Alex Law’s extensively covered call for the street’s preservation almost certainly facilitated “the retention of collective memory”, effectively counteracting the previous framing of the debate in terms of urban renewal, the researchers believe.

The upshot of the post-award media coverage was that Wing Lee Street became the “standard bearer of collective memory”, with the public gradually forming “the perception that they had a moral obligation to preserve the past”. The researchers also note that the Urban Renewal Authority made no attempt to reframe the debate. The street is now designated a conservation zone in its entirety, and *Echoes of the Rainbow* is hailed as a heritage tourism success story.

Yet the story for the Wing Lee street tenants did not have such a happy ending. The media generally tend to position greedy private landowners as co-villains with the

government in the Hong Kong heritage conservation story, with the local community as the victim. In this case, the tenants actually sided with the Urban Renewal Authority. They looked forward to receiving compensation and being relocated to modern public housing. When the street became “untouchable”, these hopes were dashed. What is needed, the researchers conclude, is a more “participatory and consistent approach” to heritage preservation and promotion.

Thanks to *Echoes of the Rainbow* and the coverage it gained in the Hong Kong media, the researchers can now describe Wing Lee Street as “a time capsule” in which “memories of the 1960s are waiting to be experienced by future visitors”. It is, they claim, “an urban cultural tourism asset in reserve”. However, the unintended consequences of that status point to the need for Hong Kong to restore buildings in a way that is consistent with both heritage and tourism needs and those of the communities affected. After all, the researchers reflect, “a happy and satisfied local community arguably plays the role of hospitable host”.

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