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Gentrification in Hong Kong? Epistemology vs. Ontology

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Abstract

This article examines the transferability of the concept of gentrification away from its Anglo-American heartland to the cities of Asia Pacific and specifically Hong Kong. An epistemological argument challenges such theoretical licence, claiming that conceptual overreach represents another example of Anglo-American hegemony asserting the primacy of its concepts in other societies and cultures. Past research suggests that if gentrification exists in Asia Pacific cities it bears some definite regional specificities of urban form, state direction and, most surprising from a Western perspective, a potentially progressive dimension for some impacted residents. Closer examination of urban discourse in Hong Kong is conducted through analysis of English and Chinese language newspapers. In both instances, gentrification is barely used to describe the pervasive processes of urban redevelopment, which otherwise receive abundant coverage. Interviews with local housing experts confirm the marginality of gentrification in academic and public discourse, and the power of a local ideology that sees urban (re)development unproblematically as a means of upward social mobility. However, in the decade-long housing bust after 1997, growing inequality has encouraged a nascent class analysis of the property market, an ontological awakening that may prove more favourable to the identification of gentrification in an Asia Pacific idiom.

Introduction

In a recent article, Maloutas (2012) has challenged the global reach of the concept of gentrification. The term, he observes, best describes a distinctive set of processes in large cities in Anglo-America, but it travels poorly outside that culture realm. Gentrification emerged and was named in a specific regional context and to extend its use is to practise 'conceptual stretching' that uncritically assumes that similar outcomes elsewhere in the world are the result of the same processes, when in fact local conditions add significant complexities. Beware, he argues, of imposing an Anglo-American template on other places, a familiar post-colonial argument that has gained added traction of late through critiques of English-language hegemony in the social sciences.

In this article we explore the epistemological argument raised by Maloutas in considering the identification and naming of gentrification in Hong Kong, or rather as we shall see, the absence of such naming. Is there a set of local circumstances that have obscured processes that are nonetheless real, or is the failure to identify gentrification in

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Hong Kong a result of its conceptual irrelevance for processes on the ground? Is a local ideology disguising ontology, or is the condition that Ong (1999) called alternative Asian modernities sufficiently robust that new forms of theorization around housing market transition are required? These questions are investigated, first, through considering the conceptual use of gentrification in several major cities of Asia Pacific; second, by a discussion of the place of gentrification in scholarly depiction of housing and property relations in Hong Kong; and third, by an examination of representations of urban redevelopment and gentrification in Hong Kong's premier English language newspaper, the *South China Morning Post,* and (more briefly) the respected Chinese language daily, *Ming Pao.* Accepting the position in media studies that the press to a fair degree reflects the views of its readership, we regard these newspaper representations of redevelopment as providing a reasonable mirror of the urban consciousness of their Chinese and expatriate readers.[1] In addition during fieldwork in Hong Kong, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a dozen housing experts from academic, government and community perspectives. These interviews provided opportunity for discussion about the conceptual relevance of gentrification in understanding transition processes in Hong Kong's housing market.

Gentrification as a neocolonial concept?

Gentrification was first named 50 years ago, and it is not surprising that its urban form has evolved through this period, while its definition has broadened. Initially gentrification involved the renovation of older inner-city neighbourhoods in large white-collar cities by in-migrating young professionals, commonly of urbane left-liberal dispositions, often improving properties through their own sweat equity. Over time that sub-market has expanded to include more mature and wealthy professionals and managers, retired households with considerable property equity, national and international absentee investors, and even families with children. The housing stock has also diversified, with the addition of new-build condominiums and town houses constructed by national and international developers located not only in redeveloped residential neighbourhoods, but also in old industrial areas, office districts and other land uses. A key understanding is that gentrification requires social class transition, with the displacement of households with lesser power in the market place (and normally at city hall as well). The significance of displacement to our understanding of gentrification has been persuasively argued (Slater, 2006), and even studies of new-build gentrification on former industrial land have suggested that such development induces off-site displacement through disrupting nearby labour markets, reconfiguring local land values, and redefining the daily life of adjacent neighbourhoods (Davidson and Lees, 2010). In the early decades, the gentrification literature was focused on cities in Anglo-America,

1 The print media have offered an abiding data base for urban research, particularly historical studies. One urban field where newspapers have provided the primary source of empirical data (similar to their use here) is locational conflict (Ley and Mercer, 1980; Romero Renau and Trudelle, 2012). There is need of course to be aware of ideological bias in the media as in all sources (including personal interviews), which is why the two newspapers selected are those given the highest credibility ratings by market research in Hong Kong. Of course, as a reviewer pointed out, media credibility may or may not be the same as a critical media perspective (see also Lai, 2007). This is where our triangulation of methods is useful, for the relative absence of gentrification in the media that we will reveal is matched by its absence in the academic literature on Hong Kong, with agreement concerning this epistemological oversight also confirmed by the Hong Kong housing experts we consulted. Note too that the press media we analysed are prepared to identify the diagnostics of gentrification – including demolition, displacement, evictions and protests – in their stories, but without making the conceptual leap to the naming of gentrification.

spreading gradually to continental Europe and recently to a number of metropolitan areas in the developing world (e.g. Harris, 2008; Visser and Kotze, 2008; Lopez-Morales, 2011). This dispersal of field sites raises a danger of the unselfconscious transfer of an Anglo-American conceptualization to other regions and cultures, a move cautioned by postcolonial critics who warn that 'the forms of distancing that can inhere in abstraction risk sidestepping the concerns of "the field" by decontextualizing places/constituencies/ideas' (Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010: 109). Their caution repeats the well-known critical intervention of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999: 41): 'The neutralization of the historical context . . . produces an apparent universalization further abetted by the work of "theorization" '.

Writing from non-Anglophone Europe, Maloutas (2012: 33) argues strongly for such historical and geographical specificity, the necessary fusion of gentrification to 'the Anglo-American metropolis'. When gentrification is sighted outside this cultural region, there is a danger, he writes, in equating apparently similar outcomes at the cost of overlooking what may be quite different and contextually specific causes. When the terminology of gentrification is thrown across diverse regional contexts, either specification errors will occur in mapping the concept to local particularities, or else the term itself is flabbily inflated to incorporate so much local variation that it loses analytical utility. The term gentrification was first coined in London and then other Anglo-American cities where post-industrial economies encouraged reclamation of the inner city by a returning professional-managerial middle class whose earlier members had suburbanized to escape the disamenities of industrialization (Glass, 1964; Ley, 1996; Lees *et al*., 2008). Elsewhere, even in nearby Paris, there was much less elite suburbanization so that return and reclamation were less significant (Preteceille, 2007). Maloutas (2012) documents important variations around gentrification's ideal type elsewhere in Europe, and a thinning of its content travelling east and south; in Athens, for example, suburbanization by elites continues to be the dominant process, while working-class upward mobility is the strongest evidence of inner-city reinvestment. Outside Europe, local specificities become ever more significant, and the echo of gentrification's full repertoire ever fainter.

Of course, the very term 'gentrification' identifies an even more specific location than Anglo-America, with language that reveals a distinctive British class and status formation. This word fits uncomfortably (if at all) in the United States whose social history involves a very different social hierarchy. Indeed it could be argued that the coining of gentrification by Glass (1964) was an ironic essentialization of a distinctively *London-based* socio-spatial architecture of Georgian squares and terraces, mews and leafy park promenades, revolving around the aristocratic centre of the royal court. Even in England this full suite of social relations and the built environment could not be reproduced in smaller cities (Bridge, 2003). There is a real danger then, as Maloutas (2012: 35) suggests, that 'this conceptualization of urban regeneration — whose context dependence becomes increasingly invisible due to its dominance — may not be adequate to travel around the world as it actually does'.

If this argument has merit, it adds support to the related criticism of Anglo-American and English-language hegemony in academic research (Aalbers, 2004; Paasi, 2005). To ascribe global primacy to a phenomenon named in London in the 1960s is itself the outcome of a privileged politics of location, whereby urban processes and forms observed in London — or with other urban concepts in New York, Chicago or Los Angeles — are specified as ideal types because of a pre-existing epistemological bias that prioritizes the location of such sightings. Processes and forms outside this privileged core are defined in terms of a pre-existing linguistic hegemony that leaves them as secondary cases of the dominant primary type.

So what do we make of the purported globalization of gentrification (Smith 2002; Atkinson and Bridge, 2005)? While such claims may demonstrate a discursive 'new urban colonialism', Maloutas (2012: 42) argues (with Bourdieu and Wacquant) against the imperial tendencies of 'neoliberal omnipotence' exported from an Anglo-American

base-camp that disallows local contingencies and resistance: 'it may be true that Scandinavian welfare regimes or developmental capitalism regimes in East Asia are under the pressure of neoliberal aggressive globalization, but it is also true that they present considerable resistance affecting decisively local socio-spatial processes and their outcomes'. An important first step is to accept the reality of a geography of gentrification that takes seriously variations in the presence/absence, landscapes, political alliances, causal trajectory and local meanings shaping the phenomenon in different places (Ley, 1996; Lees *et al*., 2008). Carrying this argument forward recently, Lees (2012: 164) continues: 'It is time now to decolonize the gentrification literature away from Euro-American perspectives and to pay much more attention to gentrification in the Global South'. Her suggestion provides a transition to the putative gentrification of cities in East and Southeast Asia.

Gentrification in Asia Pacific: alternative modernities?

The large cities of Asia Pacific unambiguously declare the raw power of unrestrained fast growth. Encountering the shock cities of China, Western visitors have responded in the same awed tones that earlier travellers expressed before Manchester in the 1840s or Chicago in the 1890s. Not unusual was Ong's (1999: 43) reaction to these dynamic and polluted urban places: it was 'like being caught up in the eye of the greatest typhoon in the history of capitalism'. There is, she suggests, a case to be made for a different kind of Asian modernity from the evidence of such relentless, state-directed, economic development, 'a paradigm change in capitalism as the West knows it' (Ong, 1999: 82). The pace of growth has led to audacious construction plans (Olds, 2001). Airports, motorways, rapid transit, downtowns are assembled in short order; entire neighbourhoods are routinely bulldozed and rebuilt. Traditional older areas have frequently been trampled underfoot by expanding business districts and new apartment towers for wealthy business people, local and expatriate, as well as middle-class professionals and managers. In Shanghai traditional neighbourhoods of *lilong* housing have been demolished and their populations displaced; municipal statistics identify the uprooting through redevelopment of an extraordinary 750,000 households, close to 10% of the metropolitan population, in only 10 years, from 1995 to 2005 (Iossifova, 2009). Here, of all places, one would expect that the injustices of displacement could scarcely be overlooked.

Some China-based scholars see considerable parallels between these processes and gentrification in the West. Wu and Luo (2007–08) declare: 'With the process of internationalization, China's gentrification tends to be similar to that of Western countries'. Other authors are more cautious. Among overseas Chinese scholars, socialized to a Western literature, there is a sense that all is not the same (Wu, 2002). Hong Kong-based, Wang and Lau (2009) have written of 'Gentrification and Shanghai's new middle class' drawing heavily upon Western conceptualizations, but in conclusion they demarcate departures. 'The seemingly familiar outputs are actually the result of different mechanisms occurring through different historical pathways' (2009: 65). One of these is the development of a consumer market. The new luxury high-rise apartments for a local and transnational elite become 'the image of the good life' and an aspiration for a much larger population who have known only much poorer residential quarters in the past. This theme is normally disregarded in Western accounts; while acknowledging the potential for toxic impacts, in some respects these authors suggest, gentrification may bring broader quality of life improvements. The point was repeated in a research workshop in Singapore on Asian urbanization that challenged 'the dystopianism of much Anglophone academic treatment of privately owned, constructed, or regulated spaces' (Hogan *et al*., 2012: 62). Instead, Asia's emergent urbanisms include 'novel combinations of public and private, which have progressive potential' (*ibid*). Li and Song

(2009) even claimed from survey research that housing conditions and satisfaction among displaced households in Shanghai exceeded the levels of other residents. An aspiration for improved housing is a theme we shall note shortly in the public response to massive redevelopment in Hong Kong.

A second point of variation is that gentrification in Asia Pacific invariably produces landscapes of high-rise redevelopment. Renovation is extremely rare as a form of reinvestment, and is limited to leisure and tourist-based reconstructions, like the shop houses in Singapore (Chang *et al*., 2004) or the selective preservation of *shikumen* houses in Shanghai's Xintiandi district (Ren, 2008).[2] Occasionally individual residential sites are significantly upgraded, but this reinvestment is often undertaken by expatriates mindful of an Anglo-American gentrification aesthetic, for example in Soho in Hong Kong's Central District, where both the local name and the renovated housing type evoke Western precedents.

Third, there is consensus that urban development in China must be framed through the perspective of state-society relations (Lin, 2007), a perspective less familiar in Western approaches. Local government supplies the paradigm for urban change, and that paradigm has shifted toward a free market model with up-market redevelopment (Tian and Wong, 2007). As a result some authors speak of state-sponsored gentrification (He, 2007) leading to marked inequalities and socio-spatial differentiation in development hot spots like central Shanghai (He, 2010). Even as local government withdraws from active participation in housing redevelopment, it legitimates and facilitates the paradigm shift to marketization. Similar trends are afoot elsewhere in China, including Beijing where the semantically-loaded Old and Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment programme was erasing the *hutong* lanes and *siheyuan* (courtyard houses) long before the intensified assault by preparations for the state-orchestrated summer Olympics in 2008. To the destructive effects of an existing local public-private growth coalition (Fang and Zhang, 2003), the Olympics brought national geopolitical ambitions that ruthlessly decimated *hutong* settlement to establish a global tourist landscape (Shin, 2009a).

Seoul's Olympics had earlier produced similar displacement effects (up to 700,000 were relocated preceding the 1988 Games) and once again a municipal initiative, the Joint Redevelopment Project policy was a pre-existing vehicle for market-driven urban transformation (Shin, 2009b). Only 20% of the original residents were resettled in Seoul's replacement housing projects, so that redevelopment and its forced evictions became a 'landlord-initiated gentrification process' (Ha, 2004: 381). Shin (2009b) sees in such policies the strong arm of the developmental state with its national goals of increased housing production and rising homeownership, albeit at the cost of social redistribution. Accumulation through property development has been a significant goal of the developmental state in Asia Pacific. New construction is part of a larger state ideology not readily thwarted by local responses, particularly when national construction imperatives are coupled with abundant profits accrued by local public-private development elites. Even in Tokyo, Saito (2003) reveals the hand that this power elite has in waterfront redevelopment, while Sorensen and Okata (2010) detect the legacy of Japan's developmental state in ramping up the scale and density of recent property construction. In a central Tokyo neighbourhood, Cybriwsky (2011) has charted the incursion of Japan's *dokken kokka,* the construction state, a longstanding alliance of powerful politicians and leading construction and land development companies. This coalition is engaged in aggressive redevelopment, removing smaller-scale apartments and commerce and replacing them with office buildings, high-rise luxury apartments, up-market retailing, and arts facilities, leading to stage-managed settings for wealthy

2 In recent years as a result of high profile preservation conflicts, the reports of Hong Kong's Urban Renewal Authority have acknowledged the public desire to secure selected sites in the built environment, and some visible but small-scale landscapes like Wing Lee Street (see below) have been preserved.

locals and expatriates. But is this truly gentrification? 'Yes, of course it is gentrification, without a doubt!' (Cybriwsky, 2011: 243).

So some researchers in several large and rapidly growing Asia Pacific cities have used, with some modification to be sure, the language of gentrification to understand the massive demolition of an older urban structure in an increasingly marketized process leading to high-density redevelopment for a more affluent market. There are distinctive regional causes and effects creating a hybrid landscape of East and West. In China there is the underlay of over 50 years of communism, and throughout Asia Pacific the strategic role of state-sponsored construction as part of national accumulation and development strategies is significant. The new-build high-rise tower is the invariable urban form. Moreover, displacement is ubiquitous and for some authors is the principal indicator that 'a process of gentrification is emerging in China' (He and Wu, 2007). There may be compensation and resettlement, though housing in the new project is becoming less common, while relocation to distant suburbs becomes more normal, as the transition to marketization unfolds. But the redeveloped high-rise apartment building also remains a source of consumer aspiration for a growing middle class for whom it represents an improved quality of life.

The housing and redevelopment market in Hong Kong

Many of these processes are present, indeed accentuated, in Hong Kong. If other cities show the role of property in national patterns of economic development, Hong Kong presents one of the purest models. Together with Singapore, Hong Kong has been identified as a property state (Haila, 2000), because so much of its political economy (and family social mobility) proceeds from the privileged role of property-based accumulation. At the same time, Haila noted that these relationships had received little academic attention.

Like other Asia Pacific cities, Hong Kong has been on a fast track of population growth. With rugged terrain providing scarce developable sites, Hong Kong is the supreme case of what Tang (2008: 357) has called 'a land (re)development regime', where 'the exchange value of property has an absolute supremacy over the value of use'. Scarcity is not only imposed by nature, however. Land is publicly owned, and a clause in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong's future prescribed the normal release of only 50 hectares of public land onto the market annually. This has created a psychology of scarcity in a fast-growing city-state, and led directly to a bull market in property, a bubble that finally burst with the 'Asian flu', the economic crisis beginning in late 1997 that provided a cruel entry to postcolonial status.

The property bubble had several consequences. First, it paid government bills, as it was intended to do (La Grange and Pretorius, 2005). Through the 1990s and into the 2000s, land sales and associated property taxes provided on average 30% of government revenues. Second, it added to the incredible wealth of an oligopoly of family tycoons who headed the largest property corporations. These corporations, led by Li Ka-shing's Cheung Kong Holdings, effectively controlled the local land market through a cosy *entente cordiale* secured by interlocking objectives with both the colonial and later the postcolonial government.[3] The tightness of this elite growth coalition and the complexity of property assembly have effectively shut out foreign competition, permitting the creation of fabulously wealthy local commercial empires. Hong Kong is far from a pure market as some suggest. During the severely depressed property market in 2002, Li

3 Forrest and Lee (2004: 2187) quote from the memoirs of the last colonial governor, Chris Patten, who while recognizing the 'grotesquely large profits' of 'a few extremely rich property-developers', concluded that to attack this monopoly would have led to a 'collapsed' property market, and a 'plummeted' stock exchange.

Ka-shing's Cheung Kong Holdings still declared profits of HK $8.8 billion, while close behind was Sun Hung Kai Properties at HK $8.5 billion.[4] Further back, but substantial in a deep recession when up to 100,000 local households were facing negative equity, were Henderson Land with profits of HK $2.15 billion and New World Development at HK $1.3 billion (Poon, 2006).

The third outcome of the 1980s–90s property bubble was that it consolidated in the public at large a particular meaning for property (Ley, 2010). In this frenzied market, property deals provided a well-recognized route to upward social mobility and middle-class status, creating 'a society organized around real estate development' (Tang, 2008: 359). Property prices doubled from 1985 to 1989, and then inflated threefold from 1989 to 1994, leading to substantial windfall profits (Smart and Lee, 2003; Forrest and Lee, 2004). The homeownership rate inflated from 25% to over 50% between 1980 and 2001 (Yip *et al*., 2007), expanding the public's stake in price appreciation and strengthening the functional role of property upgrading in creating wealth. Indeed the extraordinary real estate gains after 1984 hastened the emergence of a middle class and provided the capital enabling many wealthy households to emigrate as business class migrants to Canada or Australia during the anxious years leading up to the return of Mainland sovereignty (Ley, 2010). The frenzy in the land market became an opportunity for upward mobility, a step that was indeed achieved by many families. Facilitated by rapid economic growth, residential upgrading became a route into and through the levels of public housing and eventually to the realized dream of entering the private ownership market.

These conditions — a global city with a rising white-collar middle class, marked social and economic inequality, and rapid population growth — have provided in other Asia Pacific cities the basis for substantial 'gentrification' through redevelopment. Indeed, we can press this expectation further. In Hong Kong buildings are designed for a life of 50 years, but poor construction and inattentive management practices accelerate deterioration. It is said that mortgages are not available on properties more than 30 years old (Smart and Lee, 2003), and as one local housing expert told us, 'an old building is 20 years old'. There is very little appetite to protect or renovate older residential buildings for heritage or any other purpose (Barber, 2009). Demolish the old and rebuild, ever denser, ever higher, is the default option. Sentiment and nostalgia find little traction: 'what are erased are cultural memories, what is rebuilt are more profitable buildings' (Abbas, 1997: 80). We might expect these conditions to offer an ideal laboratory for gentrification in an Asia Pacific idiom.

In addition to land supply, the state plays a second major role in the Hong Kong housing market through its vast public housing estates. Extensive wartime destruction and refugees escaping the Chinese Civil War led to a large squatter population by 1950. The colonial government began a substantial public housing programme, for pragmatic rather than principled reasons (Smart, 1989; Yung, 2008). With continuing population growth and riots in 1966 and 1967, a continuing public housing policy became a necessary feature of good government and social stability. It included both significant construction of new units and also homeownership schemes that permitted purchase of public housing units at a discounted price with loans for private flat purchase. Promotion of homeownership continued after 1997, although it was suspended in 2002 during the extended property bust as government withdrew from housing production. With homeownership then in excess of 50% of households, government attention turned more squarely to aiding low-income tenants.

An abiding task has been the renewal of the housing stock in a tropical context where poor construction and shoddy maintenance shorten the life of buildings, in an economic context where a powerful real estate lobby is clamouring for demolition and redevelopment, and in a political context where government revenues depend on capital

4 In 2002 (as in 2012), HK $1 = US $0.13.

accumulation through property development. In 1988 the colonial government set up the Land Development Corporation (LDC) to accomplish urban renewal in public-private partnerships, with public assembly of older properties by purchase and owner compensation (Adams and Hastings, 2001; Ng, 2002a). The LDC was later replaced by the Urban Renewal Authority (URA), with a larger mandate and fuller resourcing, though it too was soon criticized as a facilitator of redevelopment that disregarded neighbourhood objectives (Ng, 2002b).

Gentrification in Hong Kong?

A fulsome literature has examined housing and redevelopment processes in Hong Kong. Researchers have examined urban renewal and population displacement (Susnik and Ganesan, 1997), the housing vulnerability of older people (Chui, 2001) and migrants from the Mainland (Newendorp, 2008), urban regeneration and sustainability (Ng 2002b), government housing policy and social justice (Yung, 2008), the privatization of public housing and the transition to homeownership (Yip *et al*., 2007), with the privileging of ownership as a means of upward social mobility (Forrest and Lee, 2004) in Hong Kong's regime of property-led accumulation (Tang, 2008). But in all of this valuable scholarship, the naming of gentrification is rarely found. One local housing expert told us there has been 'no serious research' on gentrification in Hong Kong.

We looked beyond the academic literature to the media to examine the pervasive nature of housing and redevelopment in Hong Kong's public consciousness, and to discover whether gentrification provided a conceptual lens on neighbourhood change for a broader public. We identified keywords used in accounts in the major English-language daily newspaper, the *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*). Established for over a century, and regarded as the most credible of local newspapers by the Cantonese-speaking population (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, 2011), the *SCMP*'s readers include the English-speaking Chinese population as well as overseas expatriates. While regionally focused, it also shares the cosmopolitanism of its readership and includes global business, political, sports and entertainment news. An online index of the *SCMP* begins from 31 March 1984 and our analysis ran from that date to the end of 2010. We looked for stories, including letters to the editor, which incorporated keywords from the gentrification vocabulary: demolition, displacement, eviction, redevelopment, revitalization, urban renewal and gentrification itself. Also included were two principal government agencies operating in the property market, the Land Development Corporation and its successor, the Urban Renewal Authority.

The massive presence of urban (re)development and its pervasive hold on public culture were fully reflected in the press. The term redevelopment occurred 4,738 times, or 177 times a year, almost every other day. Also prominent were urban renewal and demolition, occurring on average 71 and 66 times a year. The human dimensions of land use change did not feature as prominently. Counts for the keywords, displacement and evictions, were low until we extended the category to include variants on the root of each word: expanding evictions to also include evict/evicts/evicted/eviction raised the tally to 969 cases (36 times a year) and displacement and similar variants to 655 cases (or 24 times a year), numbers that were significant though still much lower than the accounts of physical change. The material transformation of the built environment received more media attention than the social consequences.

To sharpen the diagnostics of gentrification further we cross-tabulated several keywords, identifying events that included two properties of gentrification as the term is understood in Anglo-America. Figure 1 maps locations mentioned in *SCMP* stories between 1984 and 2010 that include both keywords 'redevelopment' and 'eviction' (and its variants) for the five administrative districts of Kowloon and the three urbanized districts of Hong Kong Island, the core areas of metropolitan development. There were

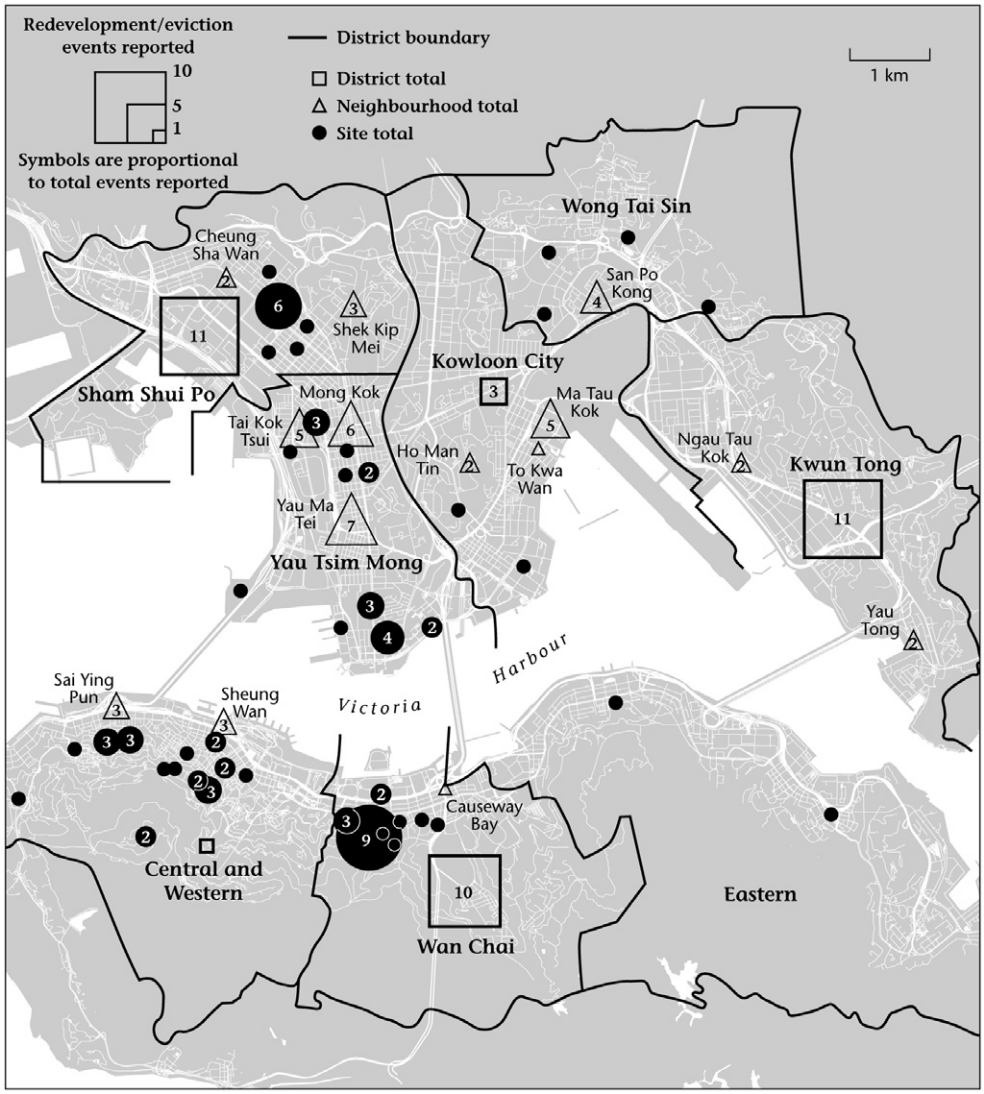

Figure 1 Sites of redevelopment with evictions in Hong Kong and Kowloon

88 stories specifying 161 events located in this highly urbanized region that featured both keywords 'redevelopment' and 'eviction'.[5] Events are mapped according to the geographical specificity of stories: closed circles identify cases located on named streets, triangles represent events with a neighbourhood specification, while square symbols reflect stories that located events only by one of the eight district names. Events are focused in Central, Wan Chai, Yau Tsim Mong and Sham Shui Po, the four districts where older tenements in particular faced pressure from expanding commercial areas and residential redevelopment (Figure 1). These four districts contained most of the urban renewal priority areas established by the LDC (Adams and Hastings, 2001) and taken over by the URA; the location of *SCMP* stories coincided closely with these priority areas.

5 A smaller number of stories referred to other parts of Hong Kong (such as the New Territories), or else to the entire territory without specifying a more focused location.

A number of newsworthy events involved the displacement of shopkeepers. A celebrated example was the demolition of Lee Tung Street (or 'Wedding Card Street') in Wan Chai, the location of many small printers who had developed the niche market of wedding invitations, personal name cards and other printed items. The URA announced redevelopment of the street's tenements for residential high-rise buildings in 2003 and compulsory purchase with compensation began. A minority of residents and shopkeepers and a broader preservation lobby resisted the plan and offered an alternative (Smart and Lam, 2009). Nine stories in the *SCMP* appeared featuring both 'redevelopment' and 'evictions' on Lee Tung Street between 2004 and 2007 (when demolition began). For shopkeepers the break-up of a retail cluster removed their local brand identity, while relocation presented higher rental costs. For homeowners and tenants a familiar neighbourhood and its community ties were destroyed. For others the cultural heritage of the street was a resource worth saving. Opposition continued over a 2-year period but the URA engaged in a process of attrition as it made compensation agreements with a majority of owners and tenants. Having assembled the land and paid off existing owners the URA sold it to private developers to construct luxury flats and a themed retail area.

Often the conflict was less about the demolition than it was about the scale of compensation. While displacees might grieve low compensation, in the first 3 years of its existence the URA committed almost HK $10 billion in compensation to property owners in 11 renewal projects (*SCMP*, 2004). Informative here is a more recent preservation fight in Wing Lee Street in Central. The short street of a dozen old and somewhat dilapidated tenements and printing workshops is regarded as the only surviving example of 1950s *tong lau* buildings. A successful case for preservation and against planned URA redevelopment was made after the street had been publicized internationally by the Hong Kong film, *Echoes of the Rainbow,* winner of a prestigious award at the 2010 Berlin Film Festival. But not all residents of Wing Lee Street welcomed preservation for cultural heritage. The URA compulsory purchase plan had been an opportunity to gain compensation including a newer public housing unit. A long-established resident of the street complained: 'I've been waiting for the government to buy out my flat and relocate us to public housing for 10 years' (Li, 2010). Instead the URA offered small grants to homeowners and tenants to permit property renovation. But street graffiti show a homeowner incensed by the level of compensation offered by the URA (Figure 2).

Redevelopment can act as a form of leverage through which a majority of tenants and owners can move into better apartments (Susnik and Ganesan, 1997). Even on Lee Tung ('Wedding Card') Street, a survey of residents showed 72% support for redevelopment. The URA compensation plan for urban renewal sites opens a complex season of negotiations and through this process relocation can be a route to better housing, providing a particularly Hong Kong inflection to 'gentrification'. Together with the strong institutional pressures for redevelopment are the desires of many residents for an advantageous relocation offer. URA rules required that the scale of compensation to owners should allow purchase of a replacement flat of comparable size not more than 7 years old, a property much newer than that sold by owners. Tenant compensation required rehousing in public units, or if ineligible, a cash settlement. A number of the Kowloon redevelopment/eviction events involved satisfactory compensation as the central bone of contention. In Kwun Tong, residents are 'more concerned with getting adequate compensation than maintaining community ties' (Lee, 2006).

Conflict and media attention typically occur only when a residual group hold out for a better deal after the majority have settled. In a conflict in Tai Kok Tsui in Kowloon (Figure 1) three *SCMP* stories in 2006 traced the last throes of resistance in an old area of tenements and workshops. Relocation agreements had been completed with over 95% of owners and tenants, but a small group held out for better compensation. Their objections were financial: 'We will not leave until we get reasonable compensation . . . We are not against redevelopment. We just want to fight for fair compensation, a compensation plan that will allow us to resettle and continue doing our own business'

Figure 2 Resistance to compensation for preservation on Wing Lee Street (photo by David Ley)

(Wong and Lam, 2006). Relocation with its loss of 'loyal customers' would threaten the future of the business. A subsequent story revealed that nearby waterfront property had already been developed as luxury high-rise apartments, imposing a wall that cut off the old district from cooling ocean breezes that also dispersed workshop pollutants (Lam, 2006). According to the district council chair: 'Residents of the old and new neighbourhoods now live in two different worlds. There's a serious polarization in Tai Kok Tsui'. According to a protester: 'The government is trying to kick us out of the inner city because we're dirty blue-collar people . . . The better environment is not for us'.

These conditions seem very familiar to gentrification narratives in other cities, but in none of the three stories is the word gentrification used. Remarkably, the term occurs in only *one* of the *SCMP*'s 88 stories describing the redevelopment/eviction events on Figure 1. Between 1984 and 2010, the *SCMP* used the term gentrification a total of only 25 times to refer to social and land use change in Hong Kong, or *once a year*. The term has assumed more significance of late with 16 of its occurrences in the 5 years from 2006 to 2010, but it still remains a very minor theme. This is a remarkable outcome for a cosmopolitan English-language newspaper. Might political pressure at the newspaper lead to suppression of the term? We have no information on this, but the fact that evictions are named and reported frequently, that protests are identified and protestors given a voice, that criticisms of the state renewal authority are noted, all suggest that the *SCMP* has some editorial independence. Certainly in Hong Kong, the *SCMP* is regarded as the most credible publication among local newspapers (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, 2011).

Gentrification, the conceptual category that provides a critical edge and some theoretical coherence to physical and social change incorporating eviction, displacement, demolition and redevelopment is simply missing from the urban vocabulary. Moreover,

in more than half the cases where an institutional instigator of redevelopment was reported, the instigator was the URA or its predecessor, the LDC. This charge had reached a senior URA manager: 'We are accused of gentrification all the time, but this macro-economic impact of redevelopment is unavoidable' (interview, 15 February 2011). In a lengthy feature on an upscale mixed-use project in Tsim Sha Tsui called *The Masterpiece,* the *SCMP* quoted a member of a government development review committee: 'Instead of serving the public by regenerating their living environment, the URA becomes a developer and creates gentrification' (Lai and Liu, 2010). Gentrification it certainly was, as an older, low-income neighbourhood had been transformed, with the smallest new one-bedroom unit selling for HK $24.5 million in 2009. But missing in this accusation was criticism of the role of the private corporation, the New World Development Company, who changed the approved land use plan to add almost 500,000 square feet of luxury serviced apartments.

The view from *Ming Pao*

The hybridity of the *South China Morning Post* as an informed English-language newspaper in an Asia Pacific market opens it to Western cultural influences. Our expectations might be more tempered with the Chinese language press that serves primarily a regional market. We tested the ease of transfer of gentrification into the pages of the Hong Kong newspaper, *Ming Pao,* regarded by the public as the most credible of the Chinese language dailies (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, 2011). As before, the content of stories was traced from the online database, dating from 1996, although with *Ming Pao* we searched only for the term gentrification. This immediately raised a problem of translation.

The unambiguous English class and status allusions of gentrification do not translate comfortably to Chinese culture or language. We searched Chinese language journal articles, dictionaries, and online translation engines, and located in these sources six different ways of communicating the content and meaning of gentrification in Chinese characters (Table 1). Here is perhaps the most convincing argument for the Anglo-American specificity of the term. The 'conceptual stretching' against which Maloutas (2012) warned is apparent, for in translation 'gentrification' has splintered into a range of Chinese-language options. Moreover, many of these terms have specific connotations to feudal social hierarchies and mapping from English to Chinese historic social formations is a complex, perhaps impossible, task.

Stories in *Ming Pao* move between these varied options, and five different versions are found in 47 newspaper accounts (see Table 1). However, only 14 accounts refer to housing and neighbourhood change in Hong Kong; among these stories, four terms are used, primarily *shi shen hua/shen shi hua* (6 stories), and *gao dang hua* (5 stories). Surprisingly, *zhong chan jie ji hua* (becoming middle-class), seemingly the most culturally neutral term, does not appear at all. *Shi shen hua/shen shi hua* is the preferred term with its connotations of feudal, status-rich elites. But overall 'gentrification' as a means of organizing knowledge about urban change is used only once a year in *Ming Pao*, the same infrequency as the scarce references in the *SCMP*. When it does occur its marginality is accentuated by fragmentation among four different sets of Chinese characters with somewhat different connotations. The concept is also of recent provenance, with stories dating from 2006 or later. As in the *SCMP,* stories more often specified the URA than a private developer as the agent initiating change.

The mystery of the missing signifier

Why is the signifier, the word gentrification, absent in media accounts? Does it mean that the signified, the processes and relations associated with gentrification in daily life, are absent as well, or is there some local ideological structure that is concealing their

Table 1 Chinese-language terms for gentrification

Chinese *Term* and Etymology	Literal Translation	Press Coverage in *Ming Pao*
中产阶级化 *zhong chan jie ji hua*	Becoming middle-class (or transforming into middle-class)	2 events, 0 on housing/ neighbourhoods
缙绅化 *jin shen hua*	Becoming gentry (or transforming into gentry)	1 event, 1 on housing/ neighbourhoods
缙绅 jin shen	In feudal times, a term for addressing those who currently or previously held government official posts	
绅士化 *shen shi hua* or 士绅化 *shi shen hua*	Becoming gentry (or transforming into gentry)	7 events, 6 on housing/ neighbourhoods
士绅 shi shen or 绅士 shen shi (both are used)	In feudal times, referring to those with power and scholarly honours or official ranks, usually the landowners and retired government officials	
高档化 *gao dang hua*	Becoming 'higher-class' (or transforming into 'higher-class')	14 events, 5 on housing/ neighbourhoods
高档 gao dang	Top grade, superior quality; when applied to consumer goods, it refers to high-grade or expensive goods with sought-after brand names	
乡绅化 *xiang shen hua*	Becoming rural gentry	0 events
乡绅 xiang shen	The gentry in the villages/countryside	
贵族化 *gui zu hua*	Becoming a noble or aristocrat	23 events, 2 on housing/ neighbourhoods
贵族 gui zu	Noble	

recognition? We alluded to this blind spot with the dozen housing specialists interviewed in Hong Kong. They confirmed the existence of taken-for-granted assumptions in the meaning of the housing market in public culture. The land market is a meta-narrative, a unifying territorial value: 'Real estate is everyone's passion; it's a hobby, a cultural value' (interview with housing economist 1, 17 February 2011); 'The major business of all Hong Kong people is their property' (interview with housing economist 2, 16 February 2011). Consequently, 'because we have a market-led economy, [gentrification] is the norm, people just accept it' (interview with community activist, 15 February 2011). The workings of the land market are not simply a neutral, non-reflected dimension of everyday life. Instead the housing market is *affirmed* as a vehicle to improve everyday conditions and propel upward social mobility. 'Gentrification is not a concern for people, there's a mystique of wealth through upgrading . . . The land market sets the scene in Hong Kong; we're onto a good thing with land' (interview with social worker 1, 16 February 2011). And again: 'Redevelopment is the taken-for-granted here . . . even the poorest accept the inevitability of demolition and redevelopment. Their dream is a new public housing unit. People welcome redevelopment' (interview with urban planner, 16 February 2011). In this respect the market assumes a privileged position: 'The market has a holiness. It's always good, and crazy to challenge it. The private sector is untouchable' (*ibid.*). The dystopian style of Western gentrification discourse does not fit comfortably here. Its dominantly critical perspective is undermined by a public consensus that property upgrading is a good thing, unquestioned and unquestionable.

Earlier, we noted three points of departure between redevelopment in old urban neighbourhoods of large cities in East Asia and 'Euro-America': the landscape form, the role of the state, and a critical interpretation of gentrification as dysfunctional urbanism in the West. In two of these three areas, the dominant landscape form of high-density

redevelopment, primarily in tower blocks, and neighbourhood change sanctioned or actively engineered by the state, the recent evolution of gentrification in Euro-America bears parallels with the existing model in Asia Pacific. For the now prevailing new-build model of gentrification in Euro-America is commonly associated with the active or passive guidance of the entrepreneurial state. While differences with the large cities of Asia Pacific are self-evident, the trend-line is one of convergence. But what of the third distinction, the critical view of gentrification which is the overwhelming narrative in Euro-America among scholars, displaced households and their political leaders?

The displacement of poorer households has been an abiding theme in the critical assessment of gentrification in Euro-America, and it is no accident that a declining emphasis on displacement has been associated with a more accommodating view of gentrification (Slater, 2006). But the Hong Kong evidence from media analysis and expert interviews does not seem to support such a single-minded interpretation. Demolition and eviction seem to be naturalized as an inevitable part of urban life in an environment where residential property deteriorates to a point that it requires replacement after 50 years or less. Eviction for publicly initiated urban renewal opens up opportunities for negotiations that can lead to improved public housing accommodation in a broader local culture where residential upgrading is a major preoccupation. When conflict arises it is rarely about the eviction itself, but usually about the scale of the compensation package. Neighbourhood change, to which Euro-Americans would apply the signifier gentrification, provides in Hong Kong an opportunity for residential upgrading for those who are displaced. Indeed this opportunity is substantial enough that the URA has to conduct a 'freezing survey', with a fixed date to confirm legal residency, for experience has shown that households will enter, if necessary squat, in designated redevelopment areas so that they can establish residency and claim eligibility for a compensation package, including potential transfer to a superior public housing unit.

Conclusion: gentrification, an awakening?

So does extending the terminology of gentrification to Hong Kong represent another case of 'false rupture and false universalisation' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 43), of severing a Euro-American discourse from its source region and uncritically universalizing it? In Hong Kong the term 'gentrification' is rarely used to organize knowledge about neighbourhood change, either in the academic literature or in public culture as revealed through media analysis and supported by local expert opinion. The absence of the concept gives some heft to the epistemological challenge by Maloutas (2012) not to over-extend the spatial reach of the concept beyond its cultural heartland. The awkward linguistic transfer from English to Chinese fragments the term and introduces different, perhaps incommensurate, cultural meanings. The high-rise, high-density model of urban redevelopment narrows the range of landscapes recognizable as gentrification in Anglo-America, while the pervasive role of the state as facilitator used to be less visible in the West. Indeed, this conjunction of the market and the state in a joint urban project is central to the alternative modernity of Asia Pacific. 'In Asia, state narratives insist that Asian modernity is an alternative to the West because in their view, capitalism is a system that should strengthen state control, not undermine it' (Ong, 1999: 82). Moreover, the cultural hegemony of property in Hong Kong and other parts of East Asia makes redevelopment of some low-income districts a more ambivalent process, for locked within the displacement of redevelopment is the hope of a negotiated settlement with the state leading to improved housing. Perhaps this is why we noticed diffidence in a broader East Asian literature in adopting the language of gentrification as it has been used in Anglo-America. A task for further research in regions like Latin America, Africa or other parts of Asia is to discern if there are similar or indeed other regionally distinctive urban processes and cultural conventions that also establish epistemological space between local

inner-city redevelopment and the gentrification problematic that has evolved in Anglo-America (Atkinson and Bridge, 2005; Harris, 2008; Lopez-Morales, 2011).

The visibility of public agencies in Hong Kong, the LDC and then the URA, in urban redevelopment has led to some criticism of these institutions from civil society (and the media), often using the measuring rod of adequate compensation but only occasionally using the language of gentrification. What is striking is not only the limited use of gentrification to refer to an ontology of housing dispossession and displacement, but also the absence of criticism against the oligopoly of large development corporations that benefit both from the URA-initiated redevelopment that merits media coverage, as well as from the private redevelopment that the media invariably overlook. In such private sector assembly according to local housing experts, 'there is endless anecdotal evidence of intimidation' (interview with policy analyst, 17 February 2011), of the use of 'nasty tactics and threatening behaviour' (interview with social worker 1, 16 February 2011) to winkle out homeowners or tenants who are holdouts in efforts at property acquisition. But if used at all, the gentrification narrative is discursively restricted to a public authority offering more transparent and generous compensation.

However, this is not quite the end of the story. We have seen that the evolution of gentrification in Euro-America from its initial theme of home renovation through sweat equity to a current preponderance of large new-build properties completed by development companies brings it closer to the paradigm of Asia Pacific. So too the role of the entrepreneurial state as facilitator or even director of redevelopment brings closer convergence between continental experiences. It is only the critical view of gentrification in Euro-America compared with the neutral or even affirmative view of urban redevelopment in Hong Kong that confounds the global symmetry. Earlier we raised the possibility that an affirmative view of redevelopment in Hong Kong might be ideological, shaped by a widespread popular belief in the role of property in upward social mobility, a set of values that are unquestioned and seemingly unquestionable. There is evidence that this popular consensus may be showing some strains.

The serious and sustained decline in property prices in Hong Kong after 1997 introduced some raw emotions into the land market: the negative equity position of householders made the huge profits of the large development corporations much less palatable. The synergies between government and the property tycoons became too transparent in large projects, leading to a growing suspicion of 'collusion' among members of a growth coalition. Manipulative marketing of luxury units by two of the four largest development companies became common knowledge, and led to a critical editorial in the *South China Morning Post* (2010). The destruction of heritage in older neighbourhoods like Wedding Card Street and infrastructure like the Star Ferry terminal became a source of public grief, criticism and popular mobilization. The tycoons who had been heroes and celebrities began to be seen in a different light. When a priest called Li Ka-shing a property market 'devil' at a Hallowe'en celebration, his off-hand accusation was widely reported (Leung, 2010). The housing experts we spoke to noted Li's changing status: 'Formerly Mr. Li had been a model; now people resent his heartless monopoly. The tycoons are too greedy; they are only leaving other people a bowl of rice' (interview with social worker 2, 17 February 2011). 'Now people hate the monopoly of developers. They used to be our heroes, but no longer. They are now seen as greedy and in collusion with government' (interview with urban planner, 16 February 2011). There is a nascent critical awareness that 'Hong Kong is ruled by developers . . . Li Ka-shing is our official ruler' (interview with community organizer, 18 February 2011).

There is disagreement whether this newfound critical awareness means a dissipation of the cultural hegemony of property or something less (Smart and Lam, 2009; Chu, 2010). An unexpected intervention aiding a conceptual awakening has been Poon's book, *Land and the Ruling Class in Hong Kong* (2006). The author worked for some years within the world of the property tycoons, but after moving to Canada published privately a scathing assessment of oligopolistic property development. A Chinese-language edition became Hong Kong's non-fiction bestseller in 2010, reprinting three times in just over a

month. The book analyses hegemony in action, the deployment of naked class power in the land market in conjunction with government. As one of our respondents observed, Poon's book 'touches the heart of many people here living under their rule'. With the dissemination of a class analysis, more discussion of gentrification in Hong Kong might be expected. So while regional contexts undoubtedly bring significant variations, we conclude that the tenacious culture of property in Hong Kong has obscured the working of a familiar set of class relations in the housing market, relations satisfactorily described by the concept of gentrification, albeit gentrification in a distinctively East Asian idiom.

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