

the mask of ageing

Doing Cultural Research for a 'Social Problem' | KIT-LING LUK

As the twenty-first century began, there was a mass demonstration in Hong Kong. On 1 July 2003 half a million people took to the streets in protest against a proposed 'anti-subversion' amendment to the Basic Law. *Time Asia* magazine captioned this event 'The Long March' and gave it a cover story titled 'Standing Up for Hong Kong', featuring a photograph of the mass protest with a female activist holding up high the flag of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR).¹ In 2004, in the third of its annual series of specials on 'Asia's Heroes', *Time Asia* selected Jackie Hung, spokeswoman of the Civil Human Rights Front which had organised the July 1 demonstration, as one of twenty members of a new generation taking the stage in Asia. Calling Hung 'the chief organizer of the pro-democracy rally that brought as many as 500 000 people on the streets on July 1', *Time Asia* described the protest as 'an amazing display of people power for non-confrontational Hong Kong'.²

This protest movement and the solidarity it aroused surprised the world; Hong Kong people are usually thought of as politically apathetic 'economic animals'.³ Much of the commentary stressed the growing number of young participants in this movement. However, in the 2003 and 2004 demonstrations a group of older women joined in and they are, more widely, frequent social protestors. Yet in newspaper coverage in 2004, only a small paragraph in the mass circulation daily *Ming Pao* noted that older women insisted on joining the July 1 march despite their physical difficulties on what was a very hot day.⁴ A TV documentary by Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) did, however, include 'older women' as a category along with young people and middle class professionals in a report on participation in the direct election of Legislative Council members.⁵

Older women need to be taken seriously as an emerging social movement base in Hong Kong, since they will make up an increasingly large proportion of an ageing population in the years to come. When I enrolled part-time in a PhD in 1999, my intention was to document the 'small stories' of older women's active participation in the communities I had observed during twelve years of involvement as an activist around local issues of housing and rent in Hong Kong. My relationships with my grandmother and mother also shaped my desire to get close to older women and to understand their world—a world which is rarely represented in a complex or subtle way, and which is often unclear and difficult for me to grasp as a member of a different generation in a society which has undergone significant changes over the past thirty years. Of course, getting to know older women and learning from their insights into the ageing process is also a way of preparing for my own ageing in this society.⁶ Initially, though, my hope when I first began working in 1998 as a professional researcher in ageing studies was to understand how gerontologists could better contribute to forming a mode of knowledge that would benefit but not limit older persons.

At the outset, I made an important choice to do my doctoral study in a Department of Cultural Studies rather than Sociology, preferring as I do to use 'qualitative' methods. The study of both social movements and older women in Hong Kong has been widely understood as a matter for sociological inquiry rather than cultural analysis. On the one hand, there is an entrenched sociological understanding of 'movements' as reflecting and entailing social changes that need to be monitored and managed. On the other hand, older women are perceived as the genderless, passive objects of welfare and services; in short, as a 'social problem'.

While my early training was in sociology, my experiences as a junior researcher working with older persons had pushed me to search for alternative approaches to ageing studies. I learnt how to do research while studying sociology and social work between 1978 and 1982 in the then Hong Kong Baptist College. Large scale surveys, appropriate sampling methods, questionnaires, face-to-face interviews and statistical considerations have always been regarded as compelling in the study of Hong Kong society and the people within it. In my experience, social research was grounded in quantitative research methods backed up with bulky sets of statistical data—an approach with a long history, of course, in methodological discussion. Few qualitative studies have been conducted in Hong Kong, and very few have been situated in an innovative framework in which research can be exploratory, small scale, and primarily concerned with raising critical *questions* of validity. Joel Best has shown how 'during the nineteenth century ... statistics—numeric statements about social life—became an authoritative way to describe social problems',⁷ and social research became less theoretical and more quantitative as objectivity and accuracy became its core values—not least, as a way of increasing the credibility of the policy proposals generated from the findings of a study. This is

perhaps particularly the case in Hong Kong where social policy formation as a process arose within and has been shaped by a history of colonial management.⁸

Debates about 'social problems' routinely raise questions: Is the problem widespread?; How many people, and which people, does it affect?; Is it getting worse?; What does it cost society?; What will it cost to deal with it? Convincing answers to such questions demand evidence, and that usually means numbers, measurements, statistics. However, as Best points out, the same group of statistics can be 'manipulated' by different sectors, including activists as well as policy makers. What became interesting to me, then, was the way in which the impact of statistical dominance in social *research* was relayed by media coverage and also by social activists and policy makers involved with the movement I wanted to study. Since 'the general public still depends upon statistics to summarise and clarify the nature of our complex society',⁹ all parties use statistical statements to establish their arguments about a 'problem' or a social movement issue. Seeking objectivity by trying to establish a comprehensive picture composed of different viewpoints and grounded in statistical information is still the dominant practice. Thus, the methodological issues raised here are not, in fact, solely methodological but indicative of a socially prevalent ideology—one which is pervasive in the everyday life politics facing older women in particular.

These experiences led me to seek a new multi-disciplinary approach to understanding older women's participation in housing-related activism. Cultural studies is of great interest to me as a field of enquiry oriented to the culture of everyday life, in which culture is understood as a *process* rather than a set of quantifiable phenomena.¹⁰ Stuart Hall insists that 'cultural studies has multiple discourses, and is a set of unstable formations ... constructed by a number of different methodologies and theoretical positions, all of them in *contention*' [my emphasis].¹¹ I see the possibilities of contention within the discipline itself as capable of allowing me to uncover the complex, ever-changing and malleable identities and interactions of older women which I experienced every day but never found represented in the media, the policy documents, the social movement pamphlets or the gerontological literature that I dealt with and helped to produce. It also allows me to discover contesting elements at work *within* various ways of representing older women and also within these women's processes of negotiating to play a role in forming their own representations.

Cultural researchers are able to articulate their experiences more freely by using a wide variety of methods to construct and interpret their subjects. My point of departure is to establish a reflexive approach capable of addressing 'the dynamic nature of cultural and social processes and of meaning production, and [having] the potential to respond to the complex ways which individuals, or agents, or subjects, inhabit their specific formations, identities and subjectivities'.¹² Ultimately, I choose to be 'a visible narrator and co-participant in the

text',¹³ working with my own ambivalence as a researcher trained to be objective in the pursuit of accuracy and comprehensiveness, yet seeking as a feminist researcher in cultural studies to address questions of authority and power, including those raised by the research process itself.

My life experiences as a social activist working with older women shape the research questions I raise in that these are marked by the challenges to our 'professionalism' which activists grounded in social work began to face in the 1980s, a period of social unrest in Hong Kong—especially in matters of housing. Of course, the 'helping' professions everywhere have been hit by economic cutbacks, service re-structuring and an increasingly problematic public image. In Hong Kong in particular, however, doubt was cast on the professionalism of social workers—especially community workers involved with 'deprived' groups, namely families or single elderly people living in poverty on derelict housing estates—because of so-called 'trouble makers' getting involved with residents' action issues. As a helping professional myself, I challenged the traditional practices of community organising and in turn experienced criticism as a 'radical' who failed to follow social work principles of objectivity and detachment.¹⁴ When I began my PhD I meant to ignore this sensitive area (it is boring to keep harping about 'the role of the social worker'), and to focus on media representations of older women in the hope of helping the women's own voices be 'heard'. However, I very quickly came to see that social movements themselves have been immensely influenced by the professionalism debates that begun in the 1980s and are still continuing today. Thus, the voice of the author in this study is retained to encourage discussion of the possibility of transforming the 'worker–client' partnership model of community work into one more closely tied to the friendship and family-like relationships I found operating in the organizations I worked with and studied.

Over the past thirty years, a well-established and organised set of knowledges has been built around aging by academic sociologists, psychologists and health and social 'care' professionals. Paralleling the increasing importance of ageing policy as a government priority has been the significant development of social gerontology in Hong Kong. This knowledge of ageing and the images and stereotypes it generates have acquired a powerful narrative authority to prescribe generalised and shared meanings of ageing as a 'social problem', and these operate in turn as part of *public* knowledge about old age, often reinforcing negative images of older persons as frail, helpless and weak. These images have become a significant reference point not only for the public but in the intimate shaping of older persons' self perceptions.

Correspondingly, a great deal of research has been oriented to studying public views of old age, rather than exploring how old persons themselves experience the ageing process in Hong Kong. Yeung suggests that many elderly people tend to accept the prevailing cultural

stereotypes concerning the aged and in turn they feel inadequate and inferior, often lacking the motivation to do things which they are actually capable of doing, and sometimes choosing to withdraw entirely from all activities.¹⁵ There is a serious need, then, for more in-depth exploration of how older persons are confined by boundaries set by the society as it decides what is appropriate for aged people and as these very boundaries work in practice at the core of the issues which affect them.

— SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF OLDER WOMEN

Studying older women who situate themselves in Hong Kong social movements, it rapidly becomes clear that their activism bears on their everyday life, namely, housing, health care services and the pension scheme. At the same time, the issues they are facing now are very much bound up with their life histories in Hong Kong, beginning in the 1940s or 1950s when they arrived in the enclave with their families to make a living. This historical experience shapes many aspects of their everyday life politics including their interactions with neighbours, their community and most importantly their children. The formation of their multiple identities today as mothers, as grandmothers and as the *por por* ('older woman' in Cantonese) living next door mingles with the complex identities they formed as much younger women. They have led long, eventful lives and shouldered many responsibilities. Yet the first thing I noticed was that while there is a general under-representation in news and academic literature of older women's participation in social movements, at the same time older women are excessively *described* as 'powerless' in such genres as radio talk shows, current affairs programmes, films and advertisements. The question arises of how older women react to this type of statement about their condition: How do they situate themselves in relation to the images created for them by the society?; Do they resist or consent, and in what ways?; If they resist, do they perhaps develop a different sense of 'resistance' to that which we attribute to other social groups?

On the other hand, if older women do indeed follow and agree with activists' claims about their 'powerless' situation, how do we understand their relationship with Hong Kong social movements that take 'empowerment' as their objective? There is a paradox inherent in 'empowerment' understood as, on the one hand, an end or a goal of social movement action, and, on the other, as an ideal necessitating the prior production and repetition of 'poor' and 'powerless' images of older women by social activists. This is an area which is under-explored by academics working on social movements or in gerontology. Nevertheless, it is vital to ask how older women have worked with this situation and how they make sense of their experiences in the process. The methodological strategies developed by cultural researchers suggest useful ways for me to conduct research which involves mixed sets of data, involving

parallel and complementary lines of enquiry in which 'outcomes' are not easily 'compared', while allowing for the reality of the researcher's subjectivity and emotional involvement.

Subjectivity matters, because while I am interested in how older women make sense of their social experiences in Hong Kong, I am aware that I never asked these questions when I was a community worker; rather, I focused on the social issue or 'problem' at hand. Nor was I particularly conscious of seeing older women as different from other social work categories such as 'residents of the community' or 'singletons and two person families'. This failure to address older women as a specific group might contribute to the genderless, ageless discourse on 'older *persons*' which prevails in academic articles, policy documents and social movement discussions in Hong Kong. Recognising this has led me to ask not only how older women are represented generally in Hong Kong and in social movements in particular, but also what distinct situations they faced as older women in their social participation.

In my wider research I focus on older women who have been active in social movements around issues significantly impacting their everyday lives, particularly forced removal within the public housing system, health costs and rent issues. These are well established in the literature as core concerns for older persons and they were commonly raised by the older women involved in my study. I also try to include different kinds of social organizations and movements involving these women; some are self-organised groups, while others are affiliated with political parties or social welfare organizations. As far as possible I have interviewed the core member, that is, the older woman who best knows the issues from the perspective of an organiser, and/or an older woman who was widely covered by the media and who may have expressed some frustration with media reporting after a specific action.

All the women are from a similar background in terms of class position assessed in relation to their living environment (all are in public housing estates), marital status (all are or have been married), economic status (all are retired, doing no formal work and receiving an old age allowance) and all suffer from chronic illness. However, they differ in their family relationships, some living alone and others with their children. They have different educational backgrounds (one could read only, one could write and read, another could neither read nor write Chinese) and, most importantly, all emigrated from mainland China in the 1950s. Their friendliness, openness and willingness to share their thoughts and life experiences with me transformed what could have been cold, detached interviews into a deep sharing of their knowledge and beliefs. Each woman was asked to talk not only about her involvement in a specific issue but about her family and life history and other activities in her daily life. Our discussions included how they perceive their images in various media; their experiences as women, and as older women; their relationships with the government, with family, and with the local community including the organizations and social

workers they worked with. Older women are not reified, isolated ‘cases’, but subjectively complex agents participating in and interacting with an environment.

— OLDER WOMEN IN ACTION: MS CHOI AND HER GROUP IN THE ESTATE

For example, Ms Choi from the Tai Hang Tung Estate (THT) was in her seventies.¹⁶ She joined a group resisting re-allocation to another housing estate and went on to act as spokeswoman and coordinator for the group. She connects with other older women by phone, by visiting them in person or by asking other older women nearby to contact a woman she wants to reach. She is popular in the neighbourhood and has an excellent network. I saw her talking to people when she toured me around the estate. She was easily able to visit the home of an elderly man nearby, talking with his daughter who was there to visit her father. After the termination of the community development project she worked with, she was still active in other elderly people’s centres. She organised meetings for me, and entertained visitors from the UWS cultural research workshop group when they came to Hong Kong. Pictures, certificates and awards for her participation in local events and activities are displayed on the walls of her home, and she is proud of the membership cards she owns. She lives with her husband and they did not have any children.

Ms Choi has lived in THT for more than 50 years.¹⁷ She moved there after the huge fire that famously destroyed ‘the six villages’ of the Shek Kip Mei squatter settlement of Kowloon West in 1953.¹⁸ Half a century later she and a group of other older women were still there when the four blocks of THT internally known as ‘the elderly estate’¹⁹ (in which they resided) were put up for redevelopment by the Housing Authority in 1995–96.²⁰ So Ms Choi joined the older women’s concern group for elderly housing rights (權益組) formed by the Shing Kung Hui Social Service Centre, an NGO operating in the THT Estate.

At the time, THT had around 900 older residents, most living in the ‘elderly estate’. In conformity with the ‘Same District Re-allocation’ Policy (原區安置) practised by the Housing Authority, the redevelopment plan required them to move to another housing estate nearby in the Shamshuipo district. These older women demanded alternative re-allocation within THT itself; they suggested that the playground adjacent to their old buildings could be used for new blocks of flats, and that after their re-allocation a new playground could be built on the site which they had vacated. Since this proposal needed endorsement not only from the Housing Authority but from other government departments, the women started a campaign for ‘Same Estate Re-allocation’ (原邨安置), securing assistance from the social workers of a Neighbourhood Level Community Development Project (NLCDP) of the Shing Kung Hui Social Service Centre.

Objecting to the women's proposal was a coalition of seven schools, including parents and students who claimed they were using the playground for classes. The Mutual Aid Committee of three other blocks adjacent to the playground also objected, arguing that new buildings on the playground site would spoil their views, their environment and their use of recreational facilities. The older women launched a series of actions to lobby support from Councillors and government departments; crucially, they negotiated with other parties to secure the space that they wanted, in the process constructing their own unique representations and using these strategically to further their struggle to demand the right to control their lives as older women.

I visited Ms Choi's new home in 2003. Her flat was indeed located in a building on the former 'playground' where the women had urged the Authority to build new blocks for their re-allocation. She told me that the two new blocks are twenty-one storeys high and have four wings, with four units in each wing. All are single person units except for two couple units on each floor, in one of which Ms Choi was living with her husband. She was very proud of her flat, which faced south—the direction widely preferred by Chinese people because it is cool during summer and warm enough in winter. During my visit, several of Ms Choi's neighbours gathered in her flat, talking freely; all older women had known each other a long time and were closely bonded. They said they were very happy to be in their old neighbourhood, a place where they expected to stay for the rest of their lives. Showing me pictures of their group, they tried to identify those who had died before they could move into the new flats they had fought for. They described this calmly but with signs of regret.

From Ms Choi's window, we could see the 'replacement playground' which they had urged the Urban Council to rent to the schools as a temporary space for physical education while they 'borrowed' the playground adjacent to the elderly estate to build their new homes. Ms Choi could watch as the old blocks were demolished to make way for the 'indoor grass playground' that was the women's strongest bargaining card when they were gathering support to 'borrow' the old playground for their new home. The 'new playground' argument was emphasised in their petitions; it allowed them to present the deal as a fair exchange and was used as proof that these older women were not 'depriving' other community groups (i.e. the students and the near neighbourhood) by urging the Authority to build flats for them in the same estate. To the women, the social workers and their other supporters (Councillors, for example), this was a sound way of countering public accusations that they were 'selfish' and 'inconsiderate'. Recalling this so-called community conflict, the older women of THT represent their experiences as 'three years and eight months', a phrase symbolically referring not to the duration of their campaign but to the 'suffering time' of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during the Second World War. Nevertheless, it is evident that the women also

enjoyed their success in negotiating to control their everyday lives, and that their struggle and victory is an unforgettable memory for them.

How did their activism work? In what follows, I outline the women's self-representations and their narrative accounts of the conflict to show how they made *use* of their prevailing image of 'frailty' to negotiate with the policy makers, social workers and the hostile part of the community. I show that far from being simple and univocal, the older women's representations have a fluidity which allows them also to figure as citizens who have contributed to the prosperity of Hong Kong, and as senior members of a society who demand respect and care from that society. All the emotions of suffering and the bad feeling of being *thought of* as 'useless' were resisted in and by their process of negotiating for space. 'Mobility' as an important subject area in the study and care of older persons was tackled skilfully by this group of older women who showed persistence and passion in pursuing their demands. In my first interview with Ms Choi and two other women, I got a taste of how they had their own cues and could move with a speed beyond my expectations. An hour into the interview, which took place in a Councillor's office, one of the women suddenly announced that the interview was over and they had to leave. To my astonishment, in an instant I was left alone in the room, packing up my tape recorder and notes. The ambivalence of the moment is that these women had just been representing *themselves* as frail, helpless and immobile, while acting swiftly in a manner which was not so 'useless' after all.

'We are old, blind, deaf and dumb ...'

As I maintained my contact with these older women in THT, I found that they were the core of the social movement on the estate. Far from being 'passive participants', 'ignorant' or 'manipulated by social workers', they were actively involved and they knew very clearly what they needed and remembered the details of events (except for the exact year of an occurrence, or some of the Councillors' names). The primary role of the older women was to mobilise support from various parties—local residents including other older people, Councillors, radio news and talk show presenters—in order to change the policy to better fit their needs.

It is no surprise to find that individual older women's identities are mixed and multi-dimensional. However, these women would always begin conversation with a *typifying* statement, 'we are old, blind, frail ...'—as Ms Choi and her group declared loudly when I interviewed them.²¹ Entirely congruent with the predominant public image of older persons, this declaration of physical frailty on the one hand reflected the older women's beliefs about themselves and on the other hand was adopted as a major argument supporting their demands for what they needed. Ms Choi used it to claim the women were too old to move to a new area:

We older persons are blind (i.e. we know nothing or cannot recognise the road), deaf, old, frail and disabled (老、弱、傷殘) ... we don't know how to take the public transport or even don't know how to walk, we all so foolish or stupid (懵閉閉). Most of us are disabled, in our four blocks there are so many disabled, blind, handicapped, deaf, dumb, anything you say ...

On the other hand, an emphasis on 'old age' as a group phenomenon rather than as a characteristic of individuals in their eighties and nineties was prevalent in the rhetoric of the THT group, allowing members to identify which neighbours actually were blind, dumb or suffering physical deterioration:

I am younger than the others, they are very old. We have some in their eighties, nineties and even people a hundred years old ...

The couple over there are dumb, the one next door is blind ... [An older woman, pointing out where people lived as she named the different group members.]

As a result they constructed themselves as a group of 'poor' and 'suffering' victims afflicted by a *policy* deficiency that did not consider their fragility and ignorance as factors, making it difficult for them to adapt to a new environment.

It is quite clear that older women did put a great deal of stress on their frailty when they represented themselves. This may be perceived as evidence of conforming to and reinforcing the socially dominant images of older persons in general and older women in particular. We could also say that this was a way of justifying their demands. Yet there is, as I have noted, a paradox involved in an elderly housing rights movement, claimed by social workers and activists to be empowering older persons, mobilising the images of frailty and victimisation used by older women themselves and by the organizations facilitating their groups. However, as we analyse more deeply the social petitions they launched, it becomes quite explicit that 'features' of old age were both a strong support to their argument for remaining on the estate, and a bargaining tool.

In order to establish that it was 'wrong' for the Authority to move them out of their familiar estate, the older women stressed concretely how they would suffer if they were forced to move. One of the situations they chose to highlight in their drama was that they would 'get lost' and 'not know how to get home' if they shifted to new areas. It is important to note that while these women repeatedly told me as well as the public that they were afraid of moving from their familiar place, at the same time they were travelling all around Hong Kong to meet with Councillors, officers from different departments and diverse organizations in order to get their support:

We have been travelling all around Hong Kong ... except for Chai Wan and Tsim Sha Tsui, those two places. We have been to the New Territories, Shatin, Tsuen Wan, Yau Ma Tei and Jordan to find the Councillors, (we have also been to) Sai Wan, Sheung Wan etc.

It seems that they could move about without difficulty, and were clearly able to identify, distinguish and locate different government offices, even tracking down the then Governor of Hong Kong:

Once we knew where he [Chris Patten] was, we went there (to meet him) ...

We have been to Cheung Sha Wan for meetings many times ... Cheung Sha Wan, the old District Council office, not the new office, the old one in Cheung Sha Wan ... We have been to the Education Department, many times; the Health Department ... we have also been to the Housing Authority many, many times ...

We tried hard to meet with the Councillors, in spite of heavy rains, thunderstorms and lightening; just three or two of us we went, even when we were busy cooking ... We went no matter whether it was day or night ... We took the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) by ourselves, it was already very late at night ... around eight thirty ...

Apart from going around everywhere to ask for support, the women undertook active organising work:

(We) delivered leaflets, leaflets asking others to support us, to the markets, MTR station, schools, we'd go anywhere to deliver the leaflets, kept on asking the others to support the aged ...

We went up the roof top and carried the chairs with us, at that time I didn't need a walking aid, we went with the volunteers to the roof tops to hold meetings and collect signatures ...

This discussion represents a group of very mobile, very energetic older women rather than women who are overwhelmingly frail, weak, passive victims. These women do also represent themselves as frail and incapable of adapting, and they strongly believe themselves to be so, but at the same time they were powerful in demanding what they needed. A good example of how far they were willing to go to use their 'weakness' as a way of exercising power against those who appear to have 'power' over them was their use of the 'poor' health of elderly people as a weapon to threaten the Authority. The women recalled saying at one of the many actions they launched:

If Mr. Yuen [the housing manager] does not promise to meet with us, we will not leave the [Housing Authority office]. He should be there'. All of us filled up their doorway, about fifty of us, saying, 'we have to meet him ... we will sleep here! All of us have to take medicine or

pills ... If something goes wrong we will need to go to hospital and you [the housing manager] must be responsible for that. The Housing Department will have to take responsibility for that ...

It is rendered explicit here that the older women's self-representations of frailty and weakness do not just emphasise 'helplessness' to generate sympathy but also have a powerful impact in relation to the social morality of 'not mistreating old people' and 'respecting one's elders'. It would seem to be crucial, then, for social movement research to take note of the conflicting identities adopted by older women. However, the women did not stop at demanding assistance by playing up their vulnerability. They went further to insist that 'you must do something to assist us'; and they did this by comparing to their own situation the power possessed by the Councillors, social workers, government officials and radio talk show presenters.

Ms Choi is identified by the organisers, by other older women and by herself as the leader of the group fighting for housing rights in THT Estate. However, she repeatedly expressed her powerlessness both at the time and in our conversations:

We are powerless, not like those Councillors ...

They [the Councillors] are more powerful than us, we are only people who know nothing (盲毛), we are really blind, so we need the guiding stick (盲公竹) that the social workers and Councillors can give us.

If they [the Councillors] say just one sentence, it is much better than if we talked for an hour, isn't it? They have their identity, status, don't they? What status do we have? Am I right?

Clearly, the women stressed the differences in power between themselves and the Councillors, policy makers and even the social workers they worked with as a way of persuading others to support them. However, this was only part of the negotiation and Ms Choi's story demonstrates that the women worked to establish identities other than that of 'older women', in particular, their identities as 'old Hong Kong' and 'old THT residents' in a way which correspondingly requires a richer understanding of the multiple identities of older women involved in negotiation.

— THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS

Not only do the older women's self-representations elude simple characterisation, but they do not take static form. This group's narratives of their actions are far more dynamic than, and even 'contradictory' to, their constructed images of frailty. This is most evident in their negotiations with their opponents, in particular the headmasters, parents and representatives of the Mutual Aid Committee (MAC). Throughout this very active process, the women

freely expressed themselves without avoiding the objections based on their supposed lack of 'care' for the younger generation.

In the THT situation, it was essential to tackle not only the inter-generational conflict aroused by the charge that older persons were depriving neighbourhood schoolchildren of their playground, but also the competing interests of residents in other blocks who would be disturbed by construction noise if the older women had their way. The women's enthusiasm was questioned and they were accused of being 'paid to join the petitions'. The older women complained that many residents were not supportive and said that what they were doing was useless. Ms Choi and her group told me that some residents looked down on them and called them 'bitches', (八婆), saying, '... what can you few bitches (八婆) do?'

This term has negative connotations for Chinese people. It is usually used to describe women who are nosy about other people's private lives and love to spread gossip; by extension, it is an abusive term for 'scolding' someone you don't like. The older women did not react to this from a feminist perspective but they did think it was unfair for the others to accuse them and criticise their petitions. Ms Choi told me that an older man who joined in one of our discussions had moved into the estate later than any of the women and also joined in the petition only at a later stage. She reminded me that the core participants were older women and she named a few names, saying that the criticism gave them strength and energy to move on and keep insisting on what they wanted. She also proudly told me that one of the residents who had criticised the group and the petition had recently applied to move into the new blocks, and that it was 'great' that they did good things for others and not just for themselves.

It is important to note the way in which gender matters in this issue. Older persons generally are treated as a homogenous, genderless group, and indeed the gender role of the older women involved in the THT dispute was never explicitly raised, even by themselves. However, these older women were definitely categorised as *women* when the neighbourhood was not supportive of their demands. Interestingly, the criticism was focused on the older women only and was not addressed to older men who were also affected by the issue. At the same time, this is further evidence that women did form the core of active participants, and were identified as such by other residents. It is important, then, to explore how the older women reacted to this identification, what they reacted to, and when they chose not to react.

— CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: 'WHO ARE WE?'

While countering all these criticisms, the older women carried on with their work and with asking support from the residents by collecting signatures. At the same time, they presented themselves as active contributors to Hong Kong society, negotiating further with their image

as 'old' and 'useless'. First, they tried to attract public attention through news reporting and radio talk shows, constructing a *self*-image which would be acceptable to the wider public. Finding themselves to be 'nobodies' without any status, the older women *represented* themselves with red caps and white T shirts adorned with red words: 'Need to build blocks on the No. 1 playground', 'Tai Hang Tung Estate'. They created slogans to say who they were and what they wanted. Thinking that it was important for others to be able to identify who they were as 'nobody' (meaning that no one knew them, in contrast with the Councillors), they constructed two identities which they foregrounded in the negotiation process.

'We have worked hard and contributed to the prosperity of Hong Kong'

It is not uncommon to find older persons calling themselves 'Old Hong Kong' (老香港), an expression emphasising that they have lived here for fifty years since they fled from mainland China after the Communist takeover in 1949. This notion was apparent in the slogan used by older persons who participated in a 2000 petition against increased charges for medical services: 'we created the prosperity but we cannot share it through medical welfare for the elderly' (繁榮安定創造、長者醫藥福利卻全無). These activists also reminded officials and the public of their social contributions by presenting themselves as a 'Grandparent' tree which had produced 'golden' fruit.²²

In a well-known argument, Norman Miners claimed that the apathy of Hong Kong people could be explained by their 'refugee' status in a colony where people dared not object to the government or the authorities.²³ However, if we contrast this with the arguments made by the older women, it is clear that Miner's thesis is unsustainable as a generalisation in two ways. First, it does not apply to those many refugees who have now spent more than fifty years in Hong Kong and regard it as a home which they are not willing to leave. Second, it does not allow for their contribution to building a society and their work for the economic development of Hong Kong.

As the women I interviewed said:

Hai, we older persons have done the hard labour ... was Hong Kong so very prosperous in the past? ... We have helped to build houses; (we) carried the bricks one by one ... [Life] was so difficult in Hong Kong at that time. If not for us, this very group of older persons, how could it be so prosperous? Are you enjoying it right now?

Older persons with their 'refugee' background think that if they have contributed to the society they deserve a better life as they grow old and the government should take better care of them.²⁴ The social movements in which older persons widely participate have very largely adopted this belief which is widespread amongst older groups in our society. I would argue, however, that it is also shaped by the embedded cultural demand of the wider society for

'reasonable and sensible action'. Most older persons are very concerned to convince the general public that they 'have made a reasonable demand' to the government as they appeal for the public's consent to those demands.

'We have been living there for so many years ...'

'The cow which first ploughed the field' (開荒牛) is another term popularly used to describe the situation of the older generations who worked hard when the situation of Hong Kong was very poor (the 1950s to the 1960s). Applying this argument to the THT estate, the older women emphasised that they went there when the estate was far from well established, and they should be able to stay when they grew old.

The living history of their estate over half a century repeatedly came up in our conversations and also figured on their banners. One example was: 'We moved in here to be the cow to plough the field, we want to stay on the same estate in later life' (搬來此處開荒牛、只求原邨享晚年). Another slogan also found in their petitions was: 'We have spent half a lifetime in Tai Hang Tung, we just want to settle nearby' (半生居於大坑東、惟盼安置在毗鄰). In their more detailed claims, they described how badly they had suffered in the early days from overcrowding and a poor environment:

A: When I first moved in, it was just like a prison, not even one window, nothing at all.

B: ... all empty, just one empty flat.

A: ... like a prison ...

B: The walls, the walls are in poor condition ...

C: Two people (share) one unit, a space for you and one for me...

A: Just half of the flat ...

A: We thirteen people lived in one unit.

B: My son was nine, not even ten years old when we moved in (they counted him) half a person. We lived near the door, when the door is open, no more space, right? So poor ...

The buildings were unsafe and needed supporting structures to prevent their collapse. When the women claimed that the blocks were widely recognised as unfit for human habitation, the implication was that they had stayed there anyway and had worked to create a decent place to live, so they should be able to enjoy the prosperity. This approach is prevalent generally in older persons' movements, reflecting as it does the view held by people who came to Hong Kong as refugees from mainland China and elsewhere that they are deserving because they have made a contribution, not because of any abstract 'entitlement' as a citizen or as a member of a society. The colonial government also shaped the related view that Hong Kong people should always rely on themselves to secure a better life, rather than making demands on the government.

My observation is that older women reacted to criticism in a subtle way that avoided directly arguing over older women's prescribed roles but rather involved insisting on 'being taken care of' instead of 'sacrificing themselves for the young'. They accept and have adapted to their physical deficiencies, but they resist the role of 'carers' and the expectations imposed on them of being able to tolerate hardships, of not having many more years to live, and of being willing to sacrifice themselves for others. At the same time, the caring role has shifted to one of mutual support between the older women themselves in their capacity as *neighbours* who have long lived together in the same estate and can take care of each other as they grow old.

In the process of getting new homes as they wished, the group had to negotiate and resist their appropriation as 'older women' who should be docile and do what they were told. As the print news and TV coverage at the time made clear, it was widely seen to be inappropriate for older women to fight or compete with school students since such women should be 'caring' and 'sacrificing' for others, especially the young. In some cases, the women also faced challenges from their own family members (especially their children) over whether they should get involved in this type of social movement. However, to everyone's surprise, the women resisted the caring role and refused to sacrifice themselves this time. Throughout the negotiation process, the women actively construed old age as, on the one hand, a state of needing to be taken care of, and, on the other, a position of demanding that their special needs should be addressed. At the same time, they circulated a new model of the caring role of older women as one of taking *care of themselves*, also extending this to a mutual support and caring amongst the members of older group.

In doing so, these older women went beyond constructing themselves as contributing members of Hong Kong society and as long-term residents of the THT estate by attaching a new meaning to a caring role which had been taken for granted but not widely discussed. They represented older women as capable of a *self care* supported by *mutual care*, thus transcending their social status as 'merely' older women who must die sooner or later; positioning themselves as carers in this way, they were no longer 'unproductive' members of society who should not have a voice. This was a powerful weapon for Ms Choi and her group to fight back against community objections, and at the same time this practice of care sustained their movement and held the loyalty of their supporters. No longer at the periphery of the movement, older women emerged as core actors in a type of 'social petitioning process' which has been largely ignored in social movement research studies.

In a longer paper, I would compare the women's self-representations and narrative accounts with the way their story was represented in other sectors: by the media, in teaching materials

used for social work diploma training,²⁵ and in pamphlets produced by various welfare organizations. While differing, these circuits of representation are not easily separated; the media are always closely linked to social movements, functioning as an important site for politics as well as a source for meaning construction, and the THT campaign was no exception. It is all the more important, then, to ask how the older women themselves understand their images in the media and in social work and social movement discourse; how they perceived the media audience ('the public') whom they hoped to reach; and how their own theories of communication and persuasion shaped their actions. Difficult to research and to analyse, these complex issues are beyond the scope of this article.

In order to approach them adequately, however, it is vital to understand that the multiple identities of older women in Hong Kong are much more fluid than the thin, rigid stereotypes of older women's poor, disabled, self-sacrificing lives can allow for. Contrasting and even contradictory at times, these identities were shaped and affirmed by the THT women as a basis for exercising a very public mode of social and political agency. By discovering and mobilising a 'positive' side to being frail and vulnerable in old age, they gained what they wanted and exercised power in the process.²⁶ This power did not end with their victory in being given new blocks on their old estate; the women went on to negotiate with the Housing Authority over the design of their new flats. They suggested signposts to help older women identify which wing of the building they were in, and handrails in the lift lobby, along the corridors and on the specially designed fire prevention door located in the corridor for their convenience, but otherwise too heavy for them to move. Older women are capable of saying what they need in their homes and they can decide what counts as a safe place for them.

A great deal of attention is given in Hong Kong as elsewhere to 'masking' the signs of age, and as Eileen Fairhurst has remarked the effort to keep on looking younger may be less about fears of losing physical attractiveness than a matter of fearing the sad social destiny attached to old age, despite a growing recognition and assertion, both in the literature and in the voices and actions of older adults themselves, that being old does not inevitably mean that one is senile, tired, sickly and frail.²⁷ On the other hand, ageing itself may also be used as a mask; my study suggests that women in Hong Kong use their ageing bodies to hide youthful identities that are not considered appropriate or congruent with social expectations of how an 'old lady' should look and act.²⁸ Featherstone and Hepworth have introduced the concept of 'the mask of age', arguing that serious tension is generated between public images and the personal perception of elderly people;²⁹ as they note elsewhere, this is of increasing concern to those who work with older people.³⁰ I would further widen our sense of ageing as a 'mask' to encompass the culturally shaped *politics* of ageing women in Hong Kong who use their age to hide their powerful abilities; they use the mask to negotiate with government officials to obtain their independence in later life.

Certainly, the successful struggle waged by Ms Choi and her group in THT seems to have been an exceptional case since policymakers and service providers continue to rely heavily on research, studies and professional assessment procedures to determine older women's needs in every aspect of their lives. However, these women's story is a compelling example of the importance of representation for older women involved in housing movements. They showed how older women can, despite objections from the rest of the community, resist arrangements made by policy makers, using their group identity as a 'social problem' to resist the unwelcome changes imposed on them; at the same time, they negotiated for public space design to take account of the lessening 'mobility' of individuals as they grow old. Their activism suggests that it is vital for social movement studies to draw new insights from the 'cultural turn' and from feminist analysis in order to understand better the successes and failures of social movements themselves.

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1. *Time Asia*, vol. 162, no. 1, 14 July 2003.
2. *Time Asia*, vol. 164, no. 15, 11 October 2004; <http://www.time.com/time/asia/2004/heroes/hjackie_hung.html>.
3. For a critique of this orthodoxy, see Fred Chiu, 'Combating the Double Processes of Decolonization/Recolonisation in Hong Kong, or "Postcoloniality" as a Double-Pronged Politics', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2002, pp. 33–61.
4. *Ming Pao*, 2 July, 2004.
5. 'The Start of an End', *Hong Kong Connection*, produced by Leung H.W., 'Hong Kong: TV Section, Radio Television Hong Kong', 19 September 2004.
6. Two texts which provide much insight are Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1993; and Kathleen Woodward, *Ageing and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991.
7. Joel Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001, p. 13.
8. The 1967 riots in Hong Kong were a major stimulus to the emergence of social policy concerns in the enclave. See Chiu and Wing-sang Law, 'Managerializing Colonialism', in Kuan-Hsing Chen (ed), *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 109–21.
9. Best, pp. 5–6.
10. See Meaghan Morris, 'A Question of Cultural Studies' in Angela McRobbie (ed) *Back to Reality?—Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp. 36–57.
11. Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power' in Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds), *Formations of Modernity*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, p. 278.

12. Ann Gray, *Research Practice for Cultural Studies: Ethnographic Methods and Lived Cultures*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 2003, p. 18.
13. Rosanna Hertz, 'Introduction: Reflexivity and Voice', in Rosanna Hertz (ed), *Reflexivity & Voice*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 1997, p. viii.
14. Kit-ling Luk, 'From History to the Future—Reviewing Community Organizing Work in Redevelopment Estates' (從歷史走到未來), in Tsuen Wan Ecumenical Social Services Center (ed), *Exploring the Route of Grassroots Organizing*, Scholar Book Service Center, pp.100–10 (in Chinese).
15. David W.T. Yeung, 'The Changing Family System in Hong Kong', in Alex Y.H. Kwan (ed), *Hong Kong Society*, second edition, Hong Kong, Writers' & Publishers' Cooperative, 1989, pp. 209–10.
16. Ms Choi chooses not to use her real name.
17. Tai Hang Tung Estate is one of the earliest built public housing estates, one of the so-called Mark I and II estates with no kitchen or toilet inside the flats. Residents had to cook in the corridor and share the public toilet and bathrooms on each floor; an Early Redevelopment Plan was announced by the Housing Authority in 1979 in order to improve the living environment of these estates.
18. The 1953 Shek Kip Mei fire marked the introduction of public housing in Hong Kong with the subsequent establishment of a Housing Authority.
19. The four blocks were mainly occupied by single elderly people or elderly couples; a total of 600 households, including over 1 000 older persons, moved in to them when their former blocks were redeveloped in the 1980s. When they first arrived, these four blocks were called 'refurnished' blocks ('改建').
20. In 1988 the Housing Authority announced a Comprehensive Redevelopment Programme aimed at evacuating and demolishing around 500 blocks of old and sub-standard housing estates by 2001. See Hong Kong Housing Authority, *Housing 88* Hong Kong, 1988, p. 5.
21. This and all following quotations are taken from the transcript of an interview I conducted on 30 June 2003, with Ms Choi, Ms Chan and Ms Ho, representatives from the THT women's concern group for elderly housing rights.
22. Press release, 18 March 2000.
23. Norman J. Miners famously noted that Chinese are described as 'participation minimal, and exhibiting political quietism' and he 'attributed this phenomenon to the result of an influx of refugees from China ... likely to avoid government and politics when they resided in Hong Kong'; cited in C.K.M. Lee, 'The Characteristics of elderly participants in aged-based social movement in Hong Kong—Implications to empowerment and advocacy', *Hong Kong Journal of Gerontology* 10 (supplement), 1996, pp. 399–403, 399.
24. One concern group contesting Accident and Emergency (A & E) unit charges argued that all people reaching the age of sixty should be entitled without a means test to a fifty per cent rebate merely by showing their identity card. Another example comes from a 2003 controversy over cuts to the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) scheme, when more than 50 representatives from the elderly CSSA Concern Group petitioned outside the Legislative Council as members were discussing the introduction of an eleven per cent cut in two stages. The large circulation newspaper *Ming Pao* published a photo of three tired-looking older women sitting near the road, their mouths covered by a banner saying: 'Old Tung [the Chief Executive] claims to respect the elders, but he fools and mistreats the elderly', *Ming Pao*, 1 October 2003.
25. Ms Choi's case was used as an example in a course offered social work diploma students in the City University of Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong. See *DSS 2174 Laboratory for Working with Communities: Student Journal* (1999–2000) for full time year two students in Diploma of Social Work, Division of Social Studies, Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong.
26. For a related argument, see Frank T.Y. Wang, 'Resistance and Old Age: The Subject Behind and the American Seniors' Movement' in Adrienne S. Chambon and Allan Irving (eds), *Resistance and Old Age*, Columbia University Press, 1999.
27. Eileen Fairhurst, '“Growing old Gracefully” as Opposed to “Mutton Dressed as Lamb”: the Social Construction of Recognizing Older Women', in Sarah Nettleton and Jonathan Watson (eds), *The Body in Everyday Life*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 258–75.
28. For a similar argument, see Bill Bytheway and Julia Johnson, 'The Sight of Age' in Sarah Nettleton and Jonathan Watson (eds), *The Body in Everyday Life*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 243–57; and Barbara Kamler and Susan Feldman, 'Mirror Mirror on the Wall: Reflections on Ageing' in David Walker and Stephen Garton (eds), *Australian Cultural History: Ageing*, no. 14, 1995, pp. 1–22.

29. Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, 'Ageing and Old Age: Reflections on the Postmodern Lifecourse' in B. Bytheway, T. Keil, P. Allat and A. Bryman (eds), *Becoming and Being Old: Sociological Approaches to Later Life*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 1989. See also Laura C. Hurd, "'WE'RE NOT OLD!": Older Women's Negotiation of Aging and Oldness', *Journal of Aging Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1999, pp. 419–39.
30. Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, 'Images of Ageing' in John Bond, Peter Coleman and Sheila Peace (ed), *Ageing in Society: An Introduction to Social Gerontology*, 2nd edition, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 1993, p. 304–32.