

# Gender in Tai Kwun: A Feminist Examination of Heritage Narrative

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## Introduction

The revitalization of Tai Kwun stands as one of Hong Kong's most significant heritage projects in the past decade, with the Hong Kong Jockey Club investing 3.8 billion HKD in its restoration and conservation. Apart from being a heritage site, it also hosts art performances by well-known international art groups, and exhibitions featuring famous artists. These cultural activities, along with invitations and other related expenses, contribute to an annual operating cost of 80 million HKD. Tai Kwun is not only a critical landmark for locals and tourists but also a symbol of Hong Kong's historical and cultural continuity. Given its prominence and substantial investment, there is the question: does Tai Kwun truly represent Hong Kong? Beyond its economic impact, in what ways does Tai Kwun enhance cultural values and social inclusion?

In recent years, the role of museums has expanded to foster social inclusion through representation, participation, access, and alleviation of disadvantage, among other factors. As a heritage site with educational functions similar to those of a museum, does Tai Kwun fulfill these roles with the significant resources it receives from society?

This research extends these concepts to explore gender issues, although its scope reaches far beyond gender. Originally centered on advocating for women's rights and striving for equality, feminism has expanded to include the interests of other marginalized and vulnerable groups who face systemic disadvantage and discrimination. Consequently, my

analysis also scrutinizes various power structures and social hierarchies at Tai Kwun, examining how these dynamics influence the representation and participation of different groups based on gender, race, class, and more. This broader perspective is essential for understanding how Tai Kwun might serve as a cultural representative and inclusive space. The paper is structured into three parts, exploring how Tai Kwun is represented, experienced, and interpreted.

## **Chapter 2 Narrative of the Compound History**

Lerner (1986) distinguished between the words “*history*” and “*History*” to underpin the partialness of recorded history. She used *history* to refer to all the events of the past as recollected by human beings, while *History* refers to the recorded and interpreted past. Women, like men, have an integral role in history, as they constitute approximately half of the population. Women have contributed to societal development, preserving collective memory, as actors and agents. On the other hand, history-making involves the creation and selection of events to be recorded and interpreted so as to give them meaning and significance. While historically the people who wrote these collections of history have been men, what have been recorded are what men have done, experienced and what they found important. From the following observations of Tai Kwun’s heritage exhibitions, we can see how the representational bias of the compound history continues to subordinate female to male and perpetuate the gender hierarchy.

## 2.1 Imbalanced Female and Male Representation

Eight heritage spaces are scattered across the site, each explaining the history of three institutions: the Central Police Compound, Victoria Prison, and the Central Magistracy. A heritage site, much like a museum, is a place that showcase knowledge and power, when stories of the past or specific groups of people are told. The curators of these exhibitions hold the power to decide which stories to tell and which to omit. In this case, the high-level decision makers of the Hong Kong Jockey Club and Tai Kwun oversee the narrative. If they present history with a biased angle, or favor certain groups, this can lead to the underrepresentation and marginalization of the missing groups' experiences. Ultimately, this perpetuates a hierarchy that elevates the experiences of those included in the narrative, while diminishing that of those who are ignored.

A masculine way of storytelling, especially that of history, often follows what Colella refers as “the history of great men and their deeds” **NEED CITATION**. This approach emphasizes, or even only exclusively includes male-centric narratives. This practice is prevalent in the Tai Kwun heritage exhibitions. Among these exhibitions, one can easily find references to men and their accomplishments, but rarely to women. For example, William Caine, who was appointed by the British government as the first Chief Magistrate, Head of Police and Gaoler, is frequently mentioned. He was in charge of establishing Hong Kong's legal system and oversaw the construction of the site. His name appears in various exhibitions, including in a brief video on the site's evolution and several timeline boards depicting institutional development (see Figure 1). The repeated mention of William Caine seems to highlight his contributions to the site, constantly reminding visitors of his critical role in transforming Hong Kong into a more “civilized” society with a systemized legal

system. This represents a masculine vision of the past by repeatedly showcasing the achievements of an elite, white man.

**Figure 1**

*William Caine on Timeline Exhibition Board*



The name Ng Choy also appears frequently in the exhibitions. He is introduced as the first Chinese magistrate on several timeline boards, indicating that the administration of law by a Chinese individual during colonial governance was a significant event “worthy” of mention (see Figure 2). Indeed, the appointment of Ng Choy under colonial rule was a breakthrough, suggesting a move towards a more equal and inclusive society. However, the same recognition should be granted to the first woman who participated in the implementation and administration of law. Acknowledging the first female in such roles would also signify a critical step towards equality and inclusivity. Unfortunately, this important milestone is not mentioned in the exhibitions. This omission underscores a bias in

the storytelling approach, which fails to equally honor the contributions of women in the legal history.

**Figure 2**

*Ng Choy on Timeline Exhibition Board*



The male-centered account of history extends beyond those maintaining law and order to include criminals and prisoners as well. Near the entrance of the exhibition “The Court Rises” at Central Magistracy, an information board recounts the story of Peter Godber, a former Police Chief Superintendent convicted of serious corruption (see Figure 3). A photo of him in handcuffs is displayed, indicating he was escorted for his preliminary hearing at the Central Magistracy.

**Figure 3**

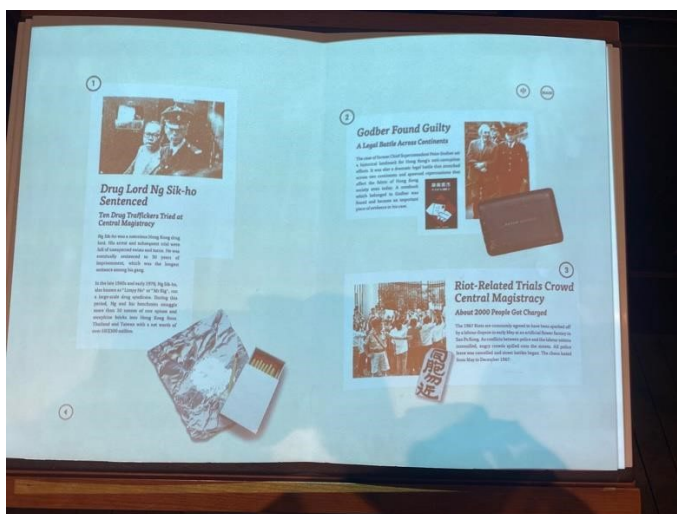
*Information Board Featuring Peter Godber's Story*



Inside the exhibition of “The Court Rises”, interactive digital displays allow visitors to learn about the three significant cases heard here: the conviction of Peter Godber, the sentencing of prominent drug lord Ng Sik-ho, also known as “Limpy Ho”, and the conviction of 2,000 people for rioting during the 1967 Hong Kong riots (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Interactive Installation at “The Court Rises”*



Additionally, in the exhibition “Victoria Prison B Hall: What Is Prison Life Like?” --- -which preserves the original layout of the prison with each cell dedicated to a theme--one cell (not balanced) focuses on “Who Were the Inmates”. It describes the types of criminals or lawbreakers generally imprisoned at Victoria Gaol, such as pirates, bandits, and drug addicts, and names two famous male inmates: Dai Wangshu and Ho Chi Minh (see Figure 5). In fact, Victoria Gaol housed both male and female prisoners. Women were imprisoned for committing murder, kidnapping, unlicensed sex trade, human trafficking, and other offences.

### Figure 5

*Photographs of Dai Wangshu and Ho Chi Minh shown*



After viewing the exhibitions, visitors could hardly sense the existence of women within the site, as reflected in the following responses:

“I don’t think the exhibitions I saw mention any women, but it was impossible that no women ever worked or lived here, at least there would be cleaning ladies. I guess their role was not as important as male at that time.” (「我印象中好似無見到提過女性。



但應該唔會一個都無掛，起碼會有清潔姐姐。我諗可能佢地嘅角色無男人咁重要先無提到」)

Alex, male, 26

“There were definitely women. It’s just that males made up most of the people here, so women are not the subject to be told when we discuss the history here. It is normal.”  
(「一定有㗎，但咁呢度男人多呀嘛，以前差館有得幾個女人㗎，呢度歷史要討論嘅對象都唔係女人，好正常啫。」)

Fai, male, 45

The narrative of exhibitions, which focus heavily on male figures, overshadows the experience of women who were also part of these historical contexts----whether as criminals, law enforcers, or other significant roles. By excluding female narratives, these exhibitions perpetuate a view of history that is male-dominated, suggesting that women's experiences are not worth noting or are somehow less important. The omission of women from these narratives can reinforce traditional gender stereotypes that see men as active participants in society—whether as leaders, criminals, or revolutionaries—while women are either invisible or passive. This reinforces the patriarchal notion that the public sphere is primarily a male domain, and women's roles and contributions, whether positive or negative, are less significant or impactful.

Even when there is a specific female mentioned, the presentation is still in a patriarchal way. An information board introducing a special staircase connecting the underground holding cell to the courtroom mentions the name Cheng Yuet-ying, who used

this staircase for her trial. This woman is referred to as “the wife of drug lord Ng Sik-ho”, but visitors have no idea how she assisted her husband and what crime she committed (see Figure 6). By identifying Cheng primarily as the wife of Ng, the narrative reduces her identity to her relationship with a man. This diminishes her agency and individuality, implying that her importance or relevance is contingent upon her marital connection with a “big man” rather than her own actions or characteristics. The reduction continues to place women in a secondary role to that of men and reinforces traditional gender hierarchy.

**Figure 6**

*Information Board Explaining the use of Staircase in the Past*



## 2.2 The Temporary Exhibition on Gender

Perhaps Tai Kwun was aware of its lack of female perspectives and experiences, as it hosted a temporary exhibition titled “Gender and Space” in 2022. This exhibition discussed women’s stories within and outside the walls of the compound and the impact of the existing gender hierarchy. It was divided into three parts: “Invisible Women in the Compound”, “Sex Workers in Segregated Spaces”, and “Women in Private and Public Spaces”.

The exhibition was successful in bringing out the hidden traces of women who had lived or worked there, including officers’ wives and daughters, female lawbreakers and prisoners, matrons, etc., whose experiences were not included in the permanent exhibitions (see figure 7). The temporary exhibition also gave context during the time, explained how colonialism, capitalist expansion, and the fusion of British and Chinese traditions contributed to the structural violence of gender. Visitors learned how political, economic, and cultural factors tangle together to form the institutional socialization of gender. However, if looked at from a feminist perspective, the exhibition still fell short of achieving an egalitarian narrative.

**Figure 7**

*Information Board about Females’ Experiences inside the Site*



### 2.2.1 Lack of Female Participation

Take the section on Sex Workers in Segregated Spaces as an example. This section sheds light on how the interplay of gender, race, and class affected the prostitution industry. It examines issues such as human trafficking targeting young Chinese women and the brothels that served either foreigners or Chinese clients. The first noticeable thing was the lack of women's involvement. There was an area where approximately 2 meters long banners of individual sex workers' portraits were hanging from the ceiling. Looking at these banners from a distance, I expected there would be personal stories of these sex workers, yet there were only their photographs, names, and years the photos were taken (see figure 8). The experience reminded me of my visit to *Red Light Secrets*, Amsterdam's Museum of Prostitution. Former or present sex workers were involved in the making of the exhibition, that they shared their own experience of being prostitutes, from the reasons why they chose the career, to their feelings in the middle of the trade, their relationship with their partners, and reasons why they left the industry (see Figure 9).

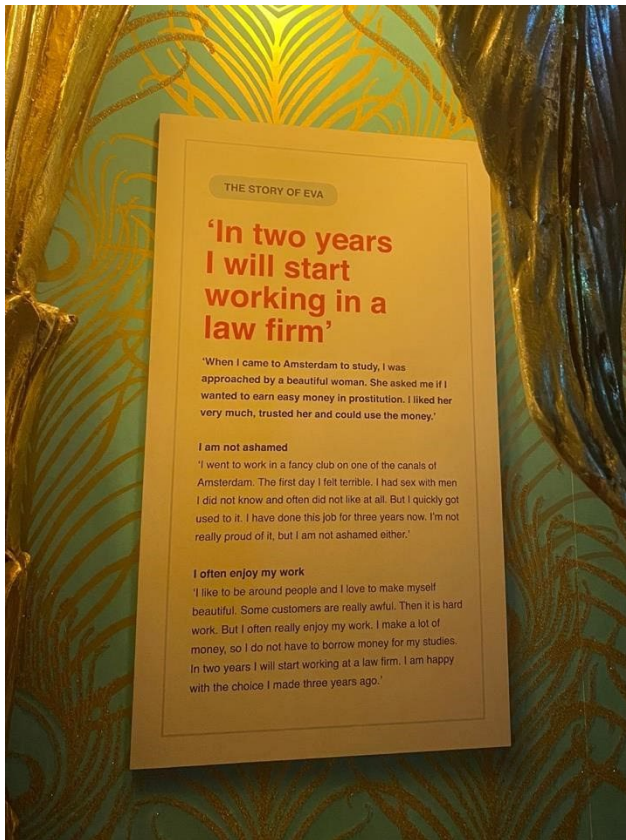
**Figure 8**

*Hanging Banners of Prostitutes' Portraits*



**Figure 9**

*Prostitute's Sharing at Red Light Secrets, Amsterdam*



The absence of women's voices in the creation and narration about their own experiences may result in a gap between the representation and reality of their lives. When women are directly involved in the content creation, they bring authenticity and depth to the narrative that cannot be brought by outside observers. Moreover, when women participate in shaping the exhibitions, they have the opportunity to frame their own stories, highlighting aspects that might be overlooked or misunderstood by others. This is particularly important in discussions about sensitive topics like prostitution, where societal stigma can heavily influence the portrayal of sex workers. For example, from the sharing of a former prostitute in the *Red Light Street*, I learned that not every one of them was forced into this business; rather, it was their choice to decide how they make a living or achieve their goals. By sharing

their own experiences, they can challenge stereotypes and misconceptions and offer a layer of personal insight and emotional depth to the exhibition, making it a more powerful and engaging experience for visitors.

### ***2.2.2 Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and Class***

The exhibition also demonstrated the intersection of gender, class, and race hierarchies. There was a corner titled “Female Agency”. This section introduced Stella Benson and Clara Haslewood—two influential figures who contributed to reforms in the realms of prostitution and child slavery (see figure 10). Benson, an English writer and social reformer, fought against licensed prostitution, condemning it as the cause of human trafficking. Haslewood, married to a British Navy officer, campaigned against the *mui tsai* (妹仔) system, criticizing it as akin to child slavery. Both played pivotal roles in enhancing female protections in England and Hong Kong, advocating for a safer, more liberal environment for women.

**Figure 10**

*Information Board Discussing Female Agency*



However, the focus on these two white, upper-class, educated women inadvertently overshadowed the lived experiences and agency of the very group they sought to help: Chinese sex workers. This oversight is a manifestation of intersectional feminism's core critique: without acknowledging the specific intersections of race, class, and gender, we risk perpetuating the erasure of marginalized voices.

Despite often being forced into the profession, many Chinese sex workers exhibited agency within their constrained circumstances. The Cantonese terms *maai gaai* (埋街), meaning to leave prostitution or marry, and *faan jim* (翻閨), indicating a return to prostitution, reflect the complex agency within their lives. These terms signify not just physical actions but also emotional and strategic decisions made by these women. Consider the story of Fu Ceon Hung (富春紅), a well-known sex worker at *Tong Sai* (塘西), a neighborhood dense with brothels. Hung was noted for her frequent *faan jim*—returning to prostitution after attempting to leave (吳昊, 1989). Despite her challenging circumstances, Hung was known for her loyalty and generosity, often helping friends in financial distress even if it meant sacrificing her own financial stability. This counters the stereotype of passivity and victimhood often associated with sex workers. It demonstrates that agency can manifest in various forms, including the support and solidarity offered within marginalized communities. The exhibition's focus on the contributions of white, upper-class women perpetuates a form of exclusion and diminish the agency of those at the grassroots level. Intersectional feminism demands the recognition of the diverse experiences and contributions of all women, particularly those from marginalized communities. However, the discussion



provided at Tai Kwun failed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Hong Kong prostitution in line with intersectional feminist principles.

### **2.3 A Hegemonic Discourse about Progress**

Tai Kwun's use of timelines and historic milestones to narrate the evolution of Hong Kong's legal and law enforcement system is supported by a discourse of civilizational progress. Timelines indicating the history of the founding and development of three institutions, the police force, prison, and magistracy, are commonly seen in exhibitions across Tai Kwun. Milestones such as the appointment of the first Chief Magistrate in 1841, the inheritance of British laws in Hong Kong in 1844, the constructions of different buildings, and their restoration after the Japanese occupation, are marked on the timelines (see Figure 11). These timelines, with their linear portrayal, suggest that progress is a direct result of colonial intervention, implying a transformation from a less ordered to a more structured and "civilized" society. This narrative aligns with Foucault's notion that knowledge, in this case, historical knowledge, is not neutral but affected by power. The power to define what constitutes civilization, order, and justice is often held by the colonizers, who were white males and regarded as the embodiment of progress and modernity

#### **Figure 11**

*Timeline Narrative.*





### 2.3.1 Historical Narrative on Progress

This discourse highlights the concept of progress, which is typically understood as a continuous and linear advancement over time. Such understanding of progress is interwoven with notions of control and dominance, values that have historically aligned with male leadership and decision-making.

This association of progress with control and dominance is connected by an underlying framework wherein advancement is achieved by authority and top-down influence. Historically, this authority had been held by a small group positioned at the top of the hierarchy, predominantly white males, thus benefiting this demographic. In the case of Tai Kwun, the British colonial government, comprised of appointees from Britain, was

responsible for establishing a systematic society in Hong Kong through setting up authoritative measures and laws. In the process of writing the history of Tai Kwun and commemorating these people, they were credited for these achievements.

### ***2.3.2 Imperialism and Masculine Narratives***

Behind the conception of progress, in fact, is the idealization of imperialism and colonialism. When the British colonial authorities arrived in Hong Kong, they brought their cultural biases and governance styles that drastically changed the regional social developmental trajectory. The discourse of progress mirrored the values and objectives of the colonizers rather than those of the colonized, since the colonizers held the power to define what was “modern” or “civilized” in creating a desired society. This resulted in the prioritization of the colonizers’ plans at the expense of local population’s needs. In colonial contexts like Hong Kong, the development plans laid out by the British, which focused on economic expansion, were primarily designed to enhance the colony’s utility to the Empire. Yet this was usually at the expense of giving up social equity and cultural preservation. This top-down approach of progress not only benefited white male decision-makers and affirmed their position at the hierarchy, but also marginalized non-Western and female perspectives, inhibiting the development of a more inclusive and liberal society.

Imperialism and colonization inherently feature a gendered nature. The gendered rhetoric of imperial projects and aspirations was critical in the treatment of the natives (Wilson, 2004). The distinctions created between colonizers and the colonized were often based on gender norms to demonstrate the cultural distance between the British and indigenous people, and to justify the dominance. For example, in colonial contexts, Black men were depicted as overly masculine, aggressive, and sexually predatory, perhaps

harassing or hurting white women (Stoler, 1989). This gender stereotype served to justify the control and surveillance over the indigenous, as well as the control of white women, as black men were considered potential threats that needed to be managed while white women needed men's protection from these threats. Moreover, masculinity was constitutive of the imperial enterprise, with white men often portrayed in sporting and hunting attire, dominating exotic locales following the common and typical narrative of a boy's adventure story. Imperialism thus perpetuated an idealized national character, valorized by qualities like independence, fortitude, courage, and paternalistic duty—traits deemed necessary for military and colonial success. This intertwining of imperialism and patriarchy suggests that these structures are mutually reinforcing.

In a nutshell, when Tai Kwun adopts a hegemonic imperialist discourse that celebrates “progress”, it upholds a patriarchal method of knowledge construction, which features conventional gender norms and power imbalances that ignore the voices of non-Western females, as well as other marginalized and vulnerable groups.

## **2.4 A New Approach to Exhibiting Prison History**

In autumn 2023, Tai Kwun introduced a significant shift in the narrative presented in its permanent exhibitions, with the renovation of two heritage galleries located in Victoria Prison's B Hall and D Hall. The new exhibitions, titled "What is Prison Life Like?" and "What Hurts? What Heals?" offer explorations of the historical and personal aspects of incarceration from a different angle. According to the official website of Tai Kwun, the new exhibitions are described as being “for reconciliation and peacemaking, for transcending the wall of separation, and for connecting all people, including the vulnerable and the

marginalized.” This marks a deliberate shift towards inclusivity, focusing on voices that were previously unheard.

#### ***2.4.1 New Exhibitions***

Previously, the exhibition in B Hall primarily focused on the physical suffering of inmates, highlighting aspects like corporal punishment. The updated exhibition now delves into the mental anguish experienced by inmates isolated from society within the prison walls. It features personal stories from former inmates who were detained at Victoria Gaol, capturing their feelings of confinement, coping mechanisms, and sources of comfort and hope. These narratives are presented through video recordings of the inmates' oral testimonies (see Figure 12). Additionally, Professor Tobias Brandner, a former prison chaplain who regularly visits prisoners, contributed to the exhibition by discussing the concept of prison as a social construction. He challenged the simplistic dichotomy of good versus evil that prisons purportedly reinforce, urging visitors to reconsider the stigmatization of prisoners and ex-prisoners (see Figure 13).

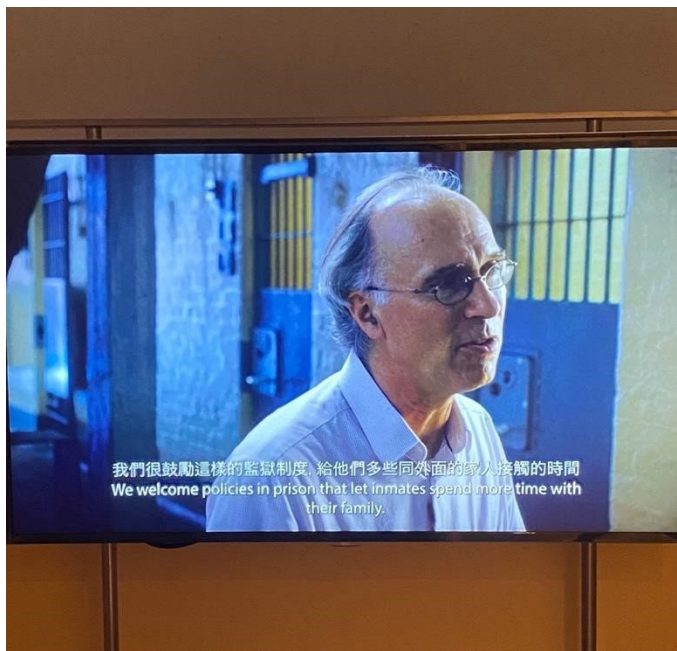
**Figure 12**

*Sharing by Former Inmate*



**Figure 13**

*Sharing by Prison Chaplain*

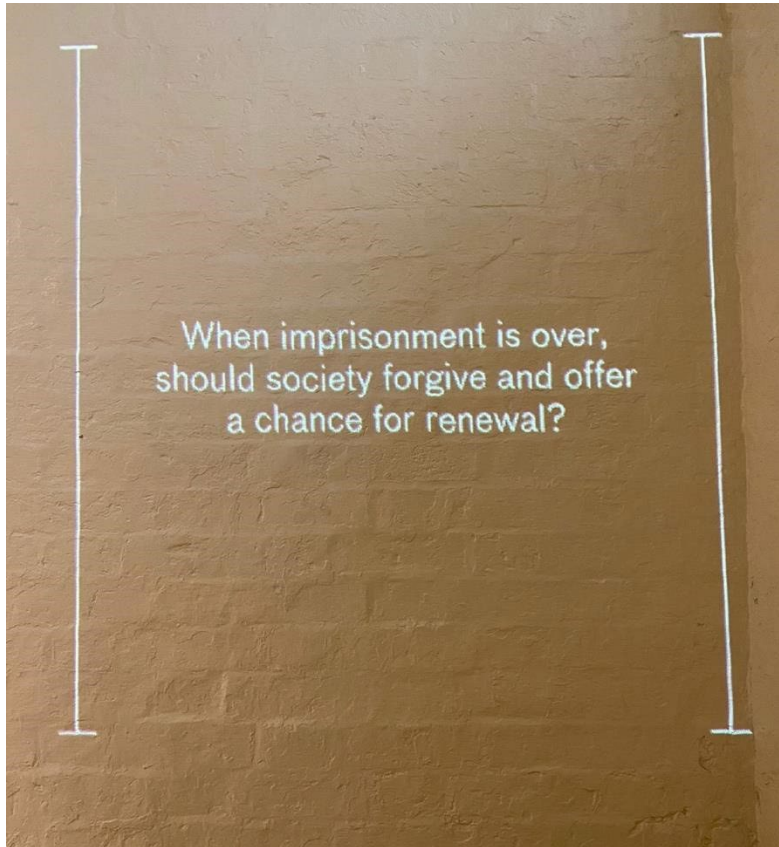


The exhibitions raise questions that encourage visitors to reflect on the role and impact of the prison system, such as "Could harsher punishments deter crime?", "When

imprisonment is over, should society forgive and offer a chance for renewal?”, and “Does the prison system address societal problems conducive to crime?” (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14**

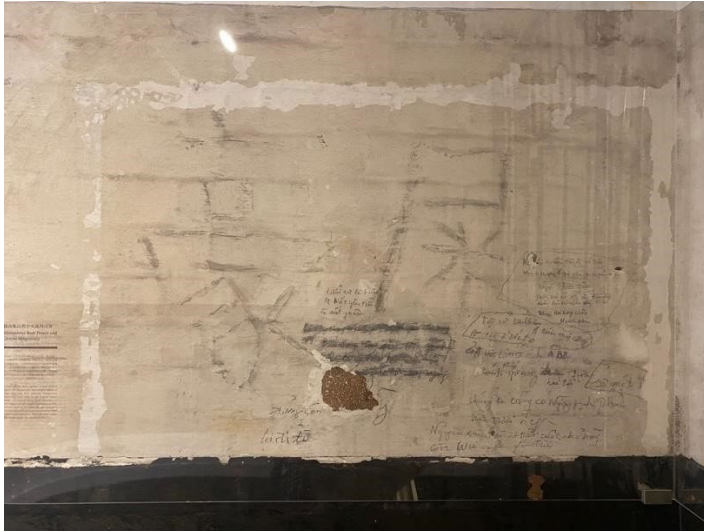
*Reflective Questions Shown in a Cell*



In D Hall, the focus has shifted from the dietary differences of inmates from various ethnic and religious backgrounds to a more intimate glimpse into their mental worlds through their artistic expressions. The cells in D Hall retain the original writings and drawings on the walls made by prisoners (see Figure 15), and one cell features a large screen displaying paintings by inmates (see Figure 16).

**Figure 15**

*Writings and Drawings on the Wall by Inmates*



**Figure 16**

*Display of Inmate Creative Works*



While many aspects of prison life, such as the uniform, equipment, and daily routines of jailers could be highlighted, these exhibitions instead choose to preserve and represent the experiences and perspectives of the prisoners.



### 2.4.2 Old Exhibitions

The new exhibitions stand in stark contrast with their predecessors in their portrayal of prison life. The previous exhibition in B Hall focused on various forms of corporal punishment, such as making inmates run on a treadmill, and flogging (see Figure 17). These illustrations of punishment showed the power and authority that prison officials held to enforce rules and laws. On top of that, to create a more immersive experience for visitors, the exhibition included a recorded scenario that mimicked daily life in the prison. This recording featured the voice of a prison guard intervening in a fight between two inmates. The guard threatened them with a punishment called “Shui Fan Fong” (水飯房). Shui Fan Fong, which means “water rice room” in English, refers to the isolation of inmates in separate confinement and providing them with only water and plain rice (Correctional Services Department).

**Figure 17**

*Visualization of Corporal Punishment*



Through these visualizations and sounds emphasizing physical suffering, the exhibition gave a message that non-conformity to rules and laws would lead to severe



consequences, and such punitive measures were necessary and effective in controlling and disciplining inmates. This could be understood as an assertion that the legal system and its enforcers are justified in using harsh measures to maintain order. Furthermore, this created a narrative of control legitimizing existing power structures. By underpinning the authority's ability to punish, it reinforced the power dynamics where the state and its representatives (prison guards) wielded power over individuals (inmates).

### ***2.4.3 Implications of the Transition***

The former exhibitions depicted inmates as an absolute evil and prison guards as good, thereby highlighting the positive aspects of the prison system as a means of keeping our society safe and justifying its existence. In contrast, the new exhibitions delve into more complex experiences behind bars and acknowledge the suffering endured by many, revealing the harsher realities of prison life. Previously hidden negative aspects have now been brought to light. These changes in the presentation challenge and critique the traditional narrative of control. They also represent a move towards a more liberal and empathetic understanding of the historical and personal dimensions of the site's history. This influenced how visitors perceived prison and prisoners, as shown in the following:

“[The exhibitions] have a very strong intention of leading the visitors to think how miserable prisoner are. They could not see their families, they could not adapt to the society when they were released, and they also express deep regret over doing something wrong.” (「好有引導性，佢問啲問題引導人諗囚犯好慘。又講佢哋同屋企人無得見面、出番嚟適應唔到社會、好後悔犯法。」)

May, female, 43

Another informant felt “emotional” (「好 emo」) when he visited the D Hall exhibition,

“In the cell where paintings of prisoners showed on the big screen with sad music playing in the background, I feel like I was immersed in the misery and loneliness that they felt” (「有個大 mon 播佢地畫啲好黑暗嘅畫，又播埋啲好 sad 嘅音樂，好似沈浸式咁，入咗佢哋嘅世界」)

Alex, female, 26

Nevertheless, the new exhibition also received negative feedbacks:

“This topic is too heavy. I remember last time I came here, it was about prisoners’ lives, having to do hard labor, some even attempted to escape, and such. I think these are more interesting, discussing lesser-known secrets.” (呢個話題有啲太沈重。我記得我上次嚟係講佢哋係入面嘅生活，要做苦力呀，有人逃獄呀個啲。我覺得呢啲好睇啲，講啲鮮為人知嘅秘辛。)

Jason, male, 32

This transition from an authoritative narrative centered on a patriarchal view of history to a more inclusive and reflective representation shows Tai Kwun’s commitment to fostering a more inclusive society. Although this may not cater to everyone’s interest, I still believe it is important to bring out the voices of the marginalized and the vulnerable. We can understand this transition through the lens of feminist theory, which advocates for voices of those who have been marginalized or oppressed to be heard and recognized.

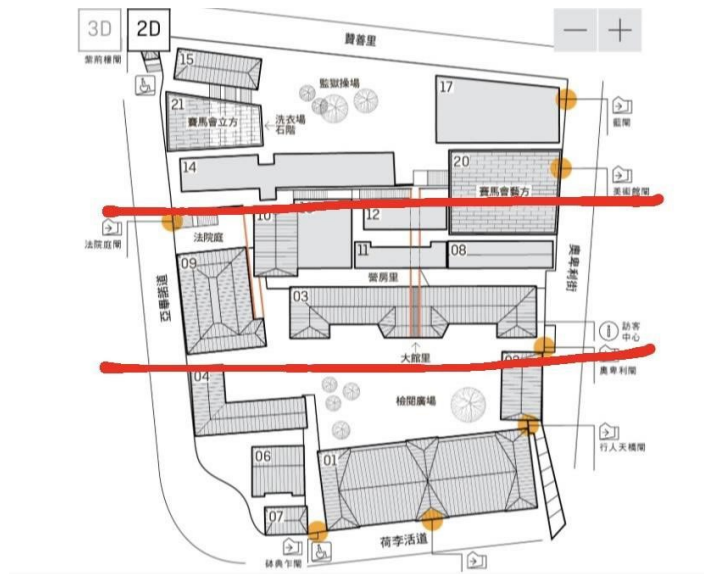
### **Chapter 3 Reconfiguration of Space and Its Influence**

The spatial configuration of a museum can offer deep insights into underlying ideas about knowledge and how cultural or social identities are shaped. This concept also applies to heritage sites. Despite retaining the original architecture of its historic buildings, the Hong Kong Jockey Club has made changes to the internal layout. These modifications are not just about enhancing the experience for visitors, but also about communicating certain values. This chapter explores how the heritage authority's decisions in restructuring Tai Kwun's spatial layout reflect broader ideologies, and how these changes affect visitors' experiences.

Before delving into the discussion, it is helpful to provide a brief introduction to the layout of the compound. Since the site is built along the Central Mid-levels, the buildings within the site are not on the same level. Broadly speaking, the site can be divided into three levels: the lowest level is the area of the former Central Police Station, the middle-level area contains the former Central Magistracy and Victoria Prison, and the highest level is designated for cells (see Figure 18 and 19). A passage, Tai Kwun Lane (大館里), was constructed as part of the revitalization for easy access, so visitors can walk through all three areas more conveniently. Since the site is branded as “a center for heritage and art”, it accommodates a variety of art galleries located at Barracks Block, a building belonging to the Central Police Station, in addition to the flagship gallery, JC Contemporary. Also, it features different kinds of restaurants, bars, and cafes, and retail stores. Most of these merchants are located around the Parade Ground, a large open-air space in the complex.

**Figure 18**

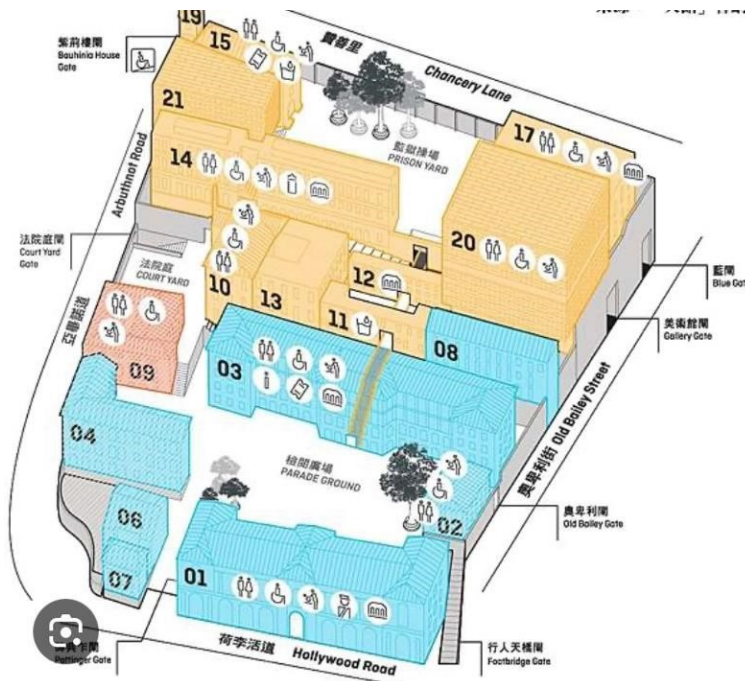
*2D Map of Tai Kwun*



Note. The distribution of the three levels is indicated by red lines

**Figure 19**

*Map of Tai Kwun*



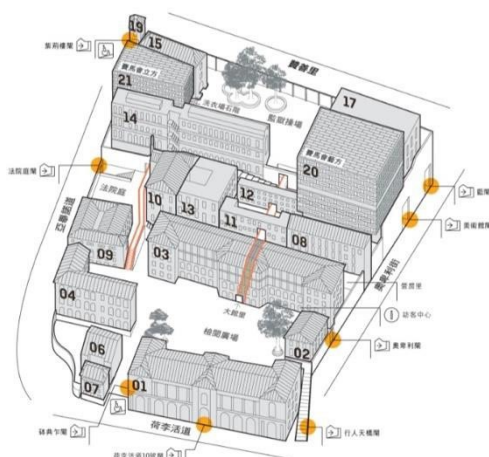
Note. Buildings in blue refer to the area of the police station, red the courtroom, and yellow for cells

### 3.1 Route Structure

The site has several gates, which served different functions when the site was in use. For example, the Blue Gate was used as the passage for the convicted to be sent to Victoria Gaol and for people visiting the prisoners, while the Courtyard Gate was for the judges' entrance into the court building when cases were heard (see Figure 20). There are eight entrances in total, yet a few clues tell that the Footbridge Gate (行人天橋閘) is the designated main entrance. It is connected to the Central Mid-Level Escalator, where most visitors enter from. The escalator is a significant landmark of Hong Kong, so this is the most frequently used entrance, especially by tourists exploring Central. The passage connecting the site and the escalator contains banners of ongoing activities or exhibitions at the site, banners that cannot be found at other entrances (see Figure 21). The information center and the Footbridge Gate are both located on the lowest level. Usually, the information center is located near the entrance so that visitors can easily find it and seek help from staff. From this evidence, we can deduce Tai Kwun framed the Footbridge Gate as the main entrance.

**Figure 20**

*Map of Tai Kwun*



Note. Entrances are highlighted in orange

**Figure 21**

*Promotional Banners on the Passage Connecting the Mid-Level Escalator and the Footbridge Gate*



### ***3.1.1 Guided Interpretation***

As previously mentioned, the Jockey Club constructed a staircase/passage known as Tai Kwun Lane, which connects three distinct levels (see Figure 22). From the earlier description, we understand that the journey begins at the lowest level, the site of the former Central Police Station. The pathway then leads visitors upward to the courtroom area and finally to the prison blocks (see Figure 19).

**Figure 22**

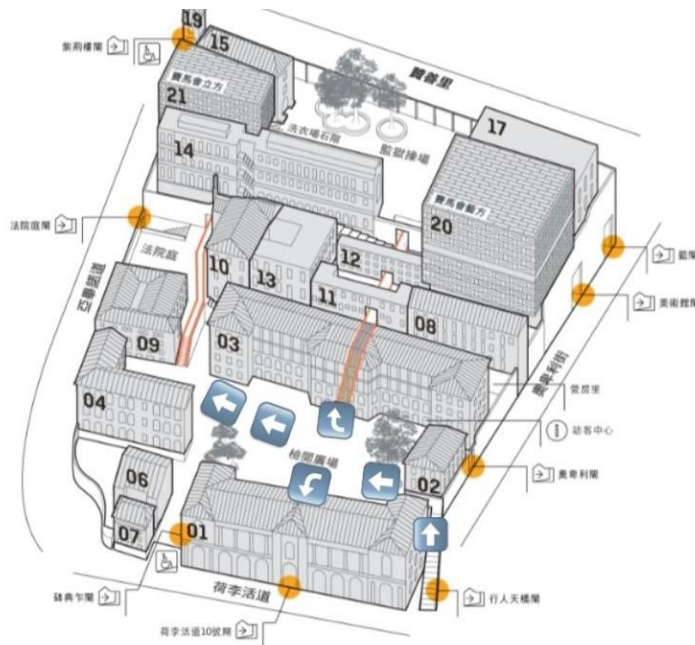
*Tai Kwun Lane*



Upon entering through the Footbridge Gate, visitors typically choose one of three directions to start their exploration: they either proceed directly through Tai Kwun Lane, head towards Block 09, or enter Block 01 (see Figure 23). Observations indicate that nearly half of the visitors opted for Tai Kwun Lane, while 30 percent chose to move towards Block 09.

**Figure 23**

*Possible Routes Visitors Take*



Note. The arrows indicate possible direction that visitors take when they enter through the Footbridge Gate

If a visitor starts from the Parade Ground (檢閱廣場), and proceeds through Tai Kwun Lane, he/she would then arrive at the Central Magistracy, and finally at the Victoria Prison. This route provides a sequential, chronological depiction of the justice process, from arrest at the police station, through judgement in the courtroom, to the final consequence of incarceration in cells. This structured path influences visitors' perceptions of the Hong Kong justice system, illustrating it as a logical and orderly progression. This portrayal helps to normalize the justice system in the minds of visitors, presenting it as a rational and accepted method for maintaining law and order.



This normalization process establishes an authoritative narrative that determined how the justice system is viewed. By guiding visitors through a logical sequence of justice-related sites, the narrative subtly encourages the acceptance of the system as inherently proper, potentially discouraging critical reflection on its shortcomings. This authoritative narrative of control not only shapes visitors' understanding but also subtly endorses the system's legitimacy, making the existing structures appear normal and unquestionable.

### ***3.1.2 Selective Emphasis***

The creation of Tai Kwun Lane significantly influences both the directional flow and the content observed by visitors. This passage strategically connects various buildings within different sectors of the institution, thereby highlighting these areas and their adjacent structures over others. As a result, buildings situated on the periphery receive considerably less attention, affecting the historical narrative perceived by visitors.

Tai Kwun Lane weaves through structures such as the Barracks Block and Prison Halls A and B, ultimately leading to the Prison Yard. This designated pathway creates a central axis around which visitor movements are concentrated. During my field observations, I noted significant visitor behavior patterns in relation to this layout. For instance, upon ascending from the parade ground to Block 12 (Prison Hall B), about 60 percent of visitors either engaged with the exhibition within this hall or stopped to take photographs in the vicinity. In contrast, only 20 percent proceeded through Block 13 towards the Courtyard, and the remaining 20 percent bypassed this intermediary level entirely, heading straight to the highest level of the site.

These observations revealed that the design of Tai Kwun Lane does influence visitors' movement. This results in the lack of attention gained by peripheral buildings if we see the lane as the central axis. For example, Block 04 (Married Inspectors' Quarters), Block 06 (Married Sergeants' Quarters) and Block 07 (Single Inspectors' Quarters) are far away from Tai Kwun Lane (see Figure 20). There were apparently fewer visitors gathered around these corners. These spaces, especially the Married Inspectors' Quarters and Married Sergeants' Quarters, represent a private domain where usually female, in this case the wives of these inspectors and sergeants, were dominant. The traces and experiences of females in these areas would be more prominent than areas representing public domain such as police offices and courtrooms. Places like police offices and court rooms were where men historically played the leading role and the female presence or influence was less notable.

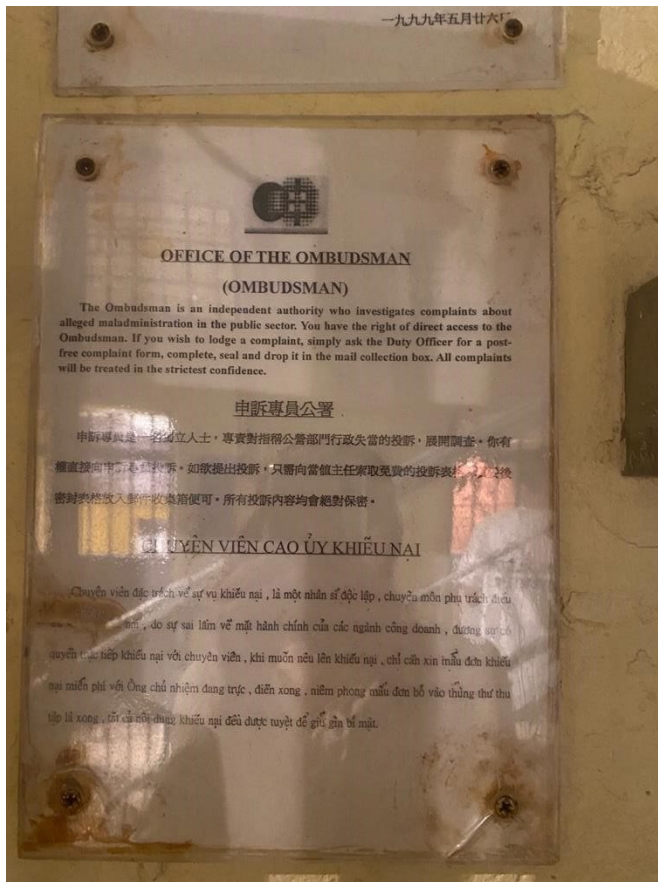
These expatriates' wives and children lived here and contributed to part of the history here. The temporary exhibition on gender, "Gender and Space" exhibited the journal of a naval surgeon, Edward Cree, in which he documented the wife of the first Chief Magistrate William Cane. In Cree's documentation, Mrs. Cane was responsible for organizing social functions for her husband's coterie, writing, "Mrs. Caine, wife of the Chief Magistrate, a lively little woman full of fun," and "there were musical parties at Mrs. Cane's house." (Tai Kwun, 2022) Although the dichotomy of the gender roles, as in public sphere for male and private sphere for female, is clearly shown, the role of Mrs. Caine hosting these social functions was not unimportant. These social functions organized by women fostered a more harmonious working environment by improving the relationship between these officers, which could further affect what happened in public domains.

Apart from these residential spaces, Block 08, the Ablutions Block, is also overlooked by many visitors. The Ablutions Block once housed immigration office from the 1980s until

the site's closure. It reflects the population movement in Hong Kong from the 1970s to the 1990s. After the Vietnam War in 1979, Hong Kong became "Port of First Asylum" and received refugees from Vietnam. Most Vietnamese refugees lived in refugee camps, but some were jailed for crimes committed and sent to Victoria Prison. Vietnamese made up a considerable portion of the population in Victoria Prison, and some notices in the cells were written in Vietnamese (see Figure 24). In addition to Vietnamese, the immigration office in the Ablutions Block was of high significance for Chinese immigrants. The "touch-base" policy in 1974 allowed illegal immigrants from Mainland China who managed to arrive in urban areas of Hong Kong without being caught by the police could remain in the city. In the 1980s, the colonial government put an end to this policy, and the Victoria Immigration Center was set up in order to process and remand overstayers awaiting repatriation.

**Figure 24**

*Notice Written in Vietnamese*



The neglect of these buildings is not only due to Tai Kwun Lane, but also the public and private space allocation designated by the heritage regime. While police offices, courtrooms, and cells are open to the public and host exhibitions, the residential buildings and Ablution Building are relegated to serving as back offices and support facilities, and are thus not accessible to the public. The approach of Tai Kwun arranging locations of heritage exhibitions is building-specific, meaning that the historical events are presented in the specific buildings where those events actually occurred. For example, events related to imprisonment are showcased within Victoria Prison buildings, while those concerning legal procedures are displayed in the building of the Central Magistracy. From this practice, we can deduce a process of Tai Kwun arranging heritage exhibitions first by selecting the historical

narrative or themes to be told, then deciding which buildings should be used to house exhibitions and allow public access, and which should serve as back-office spaces and remained closed to the public. This method highlights the historical significance of buildings where exhibitions are hosted and, at the same time diminishes the significance of those that are not open to public.

Consequently, visitors lack the opportunity to explore these spaces and are unable to learn the history associated with them. The allocation of public and private spaces, as well as the construction of Tai Kwun Lane, prioritizes certain historical narratives over others, especially those of women and excluded groups such as immigrants. By educating the public about male-dominated spaces and downplaying the significance of areas associated with domestic life and immigration, the traditional power structures are consolidated.

### **3.2 Open Spaces**

There are two large open-air spaces inside Tai Kwun: the Parade Ground (檢閱廣場) and the Prison Yard (監獄操場). The Parade Ground was originally used for police drills, while the Prison Yard was for prisoners' exercise. These spaces are sometimes used as venues for outdoor programs, and when vacant, chairs are placed for visitors (see Figure 25 and 26).

Public spaces are sites of sociability that facilitate people's face-to-face interaction. Young (1990) believed that, ideally, such spaces should be accessible to everyone and serve as places where differences are encountered and negotiated, fostering social inclusion and community cohesion. This section examines whether Tai Kwun could perform these social

and communal functions proposed by Young, by observing how people use these spaces and the activities they engage in.

**Figure 25**

*Parade Ground*



**Figure 26**

*Prison Yard*



### ***3.2.1 Place of Daily Recreation***

Roy, a 35-year-old male who works in Central, shared his use of these spaces,

“I like to bring my lunch here and eat alone on some days. Oftentimes I eat with my colleagues. But when I feel like I need some time to myself, I buy a takeaway meal and sit here.” (「有時鍾意買個外賣係度自己一個食。其實大部分時間都係同事一齊食 lunch，但有時想要啲 me time，就會過嚟。」)

Roy, male, 35, banking

A 66 year-old female, Lillian, who lives nearby, also find solace in Tai Kwun,  
“I live on my own, which can be very boring. I come here for a morning walk to get  
some fresh air, then head to the wet market nearby to buy ingredients for the day’s  
meals.” (「我自己一個人住，好悶㗎嘛。有時朝早過嚟散下步吸收下新鮮空氣，  
散完步就過去隔離街市買餸。」)

Lillian, female, 66, retired

These responses show that, as a public space, Tai Kwun can offer a daily recreational  
or escape place for those living or working nearby, and enhance their emotional well-being.  
While there was a segment of visitors from the immediate neighborhood, they were relatively  
few in number. From my observations and interviews, I learned that the majority of visitors to  
Tai Kwun, almost 90%, did not come from the immediate neighborhood. This pattern  
suggested that most of the time, Tai Kwun functions as a destination site, attracting a broader  
demographic who may be seeking cultural engagement or leisure activities.

Central is known as one of the districts with the highest living costs of any in Hong  
Kong, inhabited predominantly by the middle class and financial elites. Therefore, Tai  
Kwun’s ability to attract people from beyond its neighborhood is double-edged: while it has  
the potential to connect diverse groups, it also has the potential to reveal and even accentuate  
socio-economic divisions.

### ***3.2.2 A Place of Social Interaction***

A father of a family, Tony, with his wife and 3 years-old son toddling and playing  
with the leaves fallen on the floor,



“We just came from Central Market. We did some shopping there and they were tired so we came here to sit. My wife and I really like this place, the environment is very comfortable. Last time we came was during Christmas; there was a Christmas tree and performances to watch, the atmosphere was quite nice” (「啲啲係中環街市個邊過

嚟，行咗陣街，佢哋見咗咪嚟呢度坐下。我同我太太幾鍾意呢度，環境好舒服。

上次嚟係聖誕，有聖誕樹，又有表演睇，氣氛都唔錯。」)

Tony, male, 34, secondary school teacher

A gay couple, Kit and Joshua, also said they had paid visits to Tai Kwun a few times.

“We come a lot. We are big fans of Hong Kong old movies. We would check out which movie playing that week online and if we want to see it, we will come. Sometimes we come twice a month, sometimes we don’t come for several months. After the screening, we may just sit here to discuss the movie. It becomes our romantic thingy.”(「我哋成

日嚟。佢逢星期日都會播電影，我哋都鍾意睇好舊個啲港產片，咁就上網睇佢個個禮

拜上咩戲，啲心水咪嚟睇。有時可以一個月嚟兩次，有時就幾個月都無我哋想睇嘅

戲。睇完就坐係度傾下偈，套戲又好，咩都好。呢樣嘢變咗我哋之間嘅小

浪漫。)

Kit, male, 39, advertising

Kit was talking about the program “Movie Steps”, a free movie screening taking place every Sunday. Indeed, there are many free activities, such as the circus performances at Christmas mentioned by Tony and installation art (see Figure 27). These programs are free

admission, encouraging community engagement and providing culturally enriching experiences that are accessible to diverse population.

**Figure 27**

*Art Installation*



Alvin brought his friend here to take a walk:

“We have known each other since secondary school, but he moved to the U.S. after graduation. He came back to Hong Kong to visit family and friends after covid. We have done enough walking, so we have a seat to catch up on each other.”（我哋中學識㗎喇，但佢畢業就移咗民去美國。肺炎呢幾年佢都無翻嚟，今次佢翻嚟咪帶佢四圍睇下。行到边咪坐係度講下大家啲近況。）

Alvin, male, 47, cook

A group of three office ladies used the space as an escape from the office like Roy, but they added the element of social interaction.

“Don’t wanna go back to the office so soon. We can get some fresh air, enjoy our coffee and gossip a bit before getting back.” (「唔想咁快返 office 住, 係度啱下氣嘆下咖啡講陣八卦先。」)

Karen, 29, clerk

These responses demonstrate that Tai Kwun is an important place for social interactions. However, these interactions are typically confined to personal social circles--people socialize with those whom they already know. This is not a place for people to meet and communicate with strangers. Therefore, it is not the kind of public space idealized by Young, where individuals can connect and come to understand each other despite their differences.

### ***3.2.3 Place as Attraction***

Two female, Irene and Michelle, one 23, and one 24, sat under the tree at Prison Yard, looking at a camera. They told me that they were taking photographs here for Instagram:

“The buildings here are distinctive and make beautiful photos backdrop. We took pictures here and at the spiral staircase. [...] saw many people checking here on Instagram and thought it was beautiful. I sent these posts to her, and she also said it was beautiful, so we arranged to come together to take photos for each other.” (「呢度啱建

築物有特色，影相好靚。我地有係出面影，都有入去旋轉樓梯嗰度影。[...]之前係 IG 見到好多人係度打卡已經覺得好靚，我 send 比佢睇，佢都話靚，我地就約埋一齊嚟幫大家影。」)

Irene, female, 23, student

A couple, a 66-year-old wife and 70-year-old husband, Mr. and Mrs. Wong, sat next to each other silently at the Parade Ground.

“My friend told me there was a flower exhibition where you could see many flowers, so I come with my husband. Only when we arrived, we found out that the event had already ended, so we just walked around to see what’s here. [...] It’s our first time here. Anyway, we are retired and don’t have much to do. It’s nice to explore something new, better than staying at home.” (「有個朋友話呢度有個花展，有得睇花，咁咪拉埋佢嚟陪我。嚟到先知原來個活動已經做完，咁都無辦法，咪周圍兜下睇下。[...] 我地第一次嚟呀，反正都退休，平時無嘢做，出嚟睇下行下都好，好過困係屋企。」)

Mrs. Wong, female, 66, retired

“After viewing the Bruce Nauman exhibition, I’m just chilling out here. [...] Having a space where you can pause and relax is very important, especially in a fast-paced city like Hong Kong.” (「睇完 Bruce Nauman 個展，係度 hea 下放空下。[...] 有個可以停低腳步喘息嘅空間好重要，尤其係香港呢啲咁急速嘅城市。」)

Christy, female, 32, art administration

These shared experiences highlight Tai Kwun's appeal as a contemporary cultural and tourist hotspot, rather than merely a heritage site focused on historical preservation. This is evident in the program's design. Later we discuss the free activities that people can join. However, there are indeed paid activities held across the site, including the Parade Ground and Prison Yard, such as the *Prison Yard Festival* (see Figure 28). This festival offered high-quality Western classical music performances, but it may not be accessible or appealing to all, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or those without a cultural upbringing that includes an appreciation of this music genre.

**Figure 28**

*Prison Yard Festival*



When I asked interviewees whether they would consider watching this music show, only four of 13 said yes.

“I don’t know how to appreciate it. If I sit here for an hour or two, I’m afraid I’ll fall asleep. I would say yes if you asked me to listen to Cantonese opera.” (邊識聽呢啲)

𢆶，坐係度一兩個鐘我驚我瞓著，你叫我聽大戲就得！)

Mrs. Wong, female, 66

### **3.2.4 Analysis**

Ms. Yeung, a 55-year-old informant, recounted her experience visiting Tai Kwun, where she encountered a promotional event by the luxury brand *Miu Miu* at the Prison Yard (see Figure 29). She wanted the free gift, so she went straight to the staff, but was rejected since it required online registration. She was not good at digital things, so she called her daughter and asked her to help with the online registration. She finally managed to complete it but ended up receiving two English books. Unfortunately, with only a basic understanding of English, she found the books unusable and passed them on to her daughter. This incident highlights a broader issue: even free activities can have barriers such as digital literacy and language proficiency, effectively excluding certain social groups.

**Figure 29**

*Miu Miu Event at Prison Yard*



When discussing the utilization of the spaces of Parade Ground and Prison Yard, it is essential to consider their surrounding context. The spiral staircase, mentioned by Irene and Michelle, is inside JC Contemporary (see Figure 30). It is a newly added modern art gallery that features paid exhibitions, such as the ongoing exhibition by Bruce Nauman, priced at 120 HKD. On top of that, art galleries, upscale dining, and retailing options further illustrate a focus on higher-income customers. For example, the *Magistracy Dining Room* offers a set menu costing 688 HKD per person (see Figure 31). During my field visit, I wanted to stop by a coffee shop *Between*, situated inside JC Contemporary. My friend and I were told that the minimum order was three items, while a cup of coffee cost 60 HKD.



**Figure 30**

*Spiral Staircase inside JC Contemporary*



**Figure 31**

*Interior of Magistracy Dining Room*





Smith and Low (2006) pointed out that modern public spaces are increasingly shaped by the forces of commodification and class-based exclusion. The design and usage of Tai Kwun align with this phenomenon, transforming it from a freely accessible public space into a semi-private space where the consumption ability directly influences the quality and extent of engagement one can have with the space.

While the initiative of Miu Miu aimed to promote gender equality by giving out works of female writers, the requirement for digital engagement and proficiency in English limited its reach to those already possessing certain advantages. Similarly, the exclusive nature of Tai Kwun's amenities, including art exhibitions, dining, and retailing options, not only segregates visitors by their socio-economic status but also send a message about who is considered an appropriate or desirable visitor. As can be seen above, many of the interviewees engaged in highly paid and respected industries, such as education, banking, and art administration.

Whether examining the open spaces of Parade Ground and Prison Yard or the entire site of Tai Kwun, the accessibility issues remain consistent. While these areas may appear open and free to all, institutional controls subtly enforce barriers based on economic and educational backgrounds. The layout and management of Tai Kwun incorporate elements that cater primarily to upper-middle-class financial capabilities. This not only limits the spectrum of individuals who can fully participate in and enjoy all aspects of Tai Kwun but also reinforces broader social hierarchies.

In such an environment, social hierarchies are played out and reinforced. Since the selective accessibility restricts lower socio-economic groups' exposure to cultural and social capitals, like those offered in art exhibitions and exclusive events, their opportunities for social mobility are limited. This perpetuates a cycle where the upper classes maintain

exclusive access to cultural and social resources, keeping these resources out of reach for lower socio-economic groups, and solidifying their own positions within the social hierarchy.

Although Tai Kwun facilitates social interactions, these tend to occur within existing personal social circles, limiting the opportunity for interactions across diverse groups. Moreover, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often find themselves excluded, unable to fully participate in or enjoy the amenities offered by Tai Kwun. Consequently, Tai Kwun, as a public space, falls short of fostering community cohesion and inadvertently perpetuates existing social inequalities. This underscores a missed potential for Tai Kwun to act as a catalyst for social integration and cohesion, thereby maintaining the status quo rather than challenging it.

### **3.3 Gender Performance**

Although the setting and some of the programs of Tai Kwun may limit access for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the place does support women's self-expression and engagement in cultural and artistic activities.

Despite progress, gender inequality in workplaces is still prevalent, whether in terms of access to management positions, pay disparities, or organizational culture (Blau & Kahn, 2016). Workplace gossip, often underestimated, can build alliances and networks crucial for career advancement, provide emotional support and validation, and offer informal influence and power (Brady et al., 2017). Additionally, gossip can highlight organizational injustices, helping to push for changes and accountability. In this context, Tai Kwun provided the three office ladies a place for such interactions, allowing them to use gossip as a tool to assert their presence, build supportive communities, and challenge gender inequalities.

Women express themselves not only through social interactions like gossip but also through taking pictures of themselves, as highlighted by respondents Irene and Michelle. Social media platforms like Instagram offer young women a space to express themselves and gain visibility. This visibility on social media can be empowering, since it allows women to control their representation and engage with a wide audience. They use these platforms not just for social interaction but also for identity formation and personal branding. This process of curating and sharing content allows women to assert their individuality and values, and potentially challenging traditional stereotypes.

Moreover, the programs and shows offered by Tai Kwun often appeal more to women. For instance, the flower event mentioned by Mrs. Wong, “Tai Kwun in Bloom”, was a market of florist studios showcasing flowers and offering floral workshops. 2024 marks the fourth year Tai Kwun has held this event. Undoubtedly there were men who attended the market and workshops, but my observation indicated that female visitors significantly outnumbered male visitors. Additionally, there are programs specifically targeted at women, such as the Miu Miu promotion function. While I avoid overgeneralizing and attributing this to gender differences, it is worth noting that in Hong Kong, societal norms and expectations regarding gender continue to shape our interest and hobbies. Therefore, it is reasonable to observe that women participate in these kinds of activities more frequently than men. By taking part in these events, women not only enrich their cultural experience but also empower themselves, fostering personal growth and challenge existing gender norms.

## **Chapter 4 Visitors' Performativity at Tai Kwun**

In this section, I use the concept of *vernacular heritage* proposed by Salemink (2021), which emphasizes how heritage is perceived and experienced by everyday people, contrasting with formal authoritative approaches. When something is labeled as heritage, it often becomes subject to the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), a concept introduced by Smith (2006). AHD frames the understanding and practice of heritage within a dominant, hegemonic discourse, influencing how we perceive and discuss heritage.

In Chapter 2, we have discussed how the heritage exhibitions in Tai Kwun construct knowledge about the past and the value of the site through a hegemonic discourse shaped by

Western and masculine values. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that visitors are not solely passive, uncritical recipients of this narrative. Instead, they actively connect their physical experience of heritage with personal and cultural memories. Through what Ang (1985) describes as emotional realism, the site engages visitors on both emotional and imaginative levels, evoking feelings that are both meaningful and perceived as 'real'. Smith (2008) also highlights the active, performative role of individuals engaging in heritage. She portrays heritage sites as arenas of cultural performance, where people can identify, reflect upon, and negotiate different cultural and social values, leading to responses like acceptance, rejection, and contestation. Building on this framework, Saleminck used the term vernacular heritage to refer to the way 'lay people', including residents and outsiders, conceive, perceive, experience, imagine, and practice heritage. This stands in contrast to the approaches of authoritative entities like state officials, the heritage regime, and cultural experts. This chapter aims to explore whether visitors' experiences diverge from the formal discourse constructed by authorities.

#### **4.1 Understanding of and Connection to Tai Kwun**

A visitor found the exhibition content a bit ironic, when she saw a slogan hung on the wall that says, "Brains better than bullets and brute force" (see Figure 32)

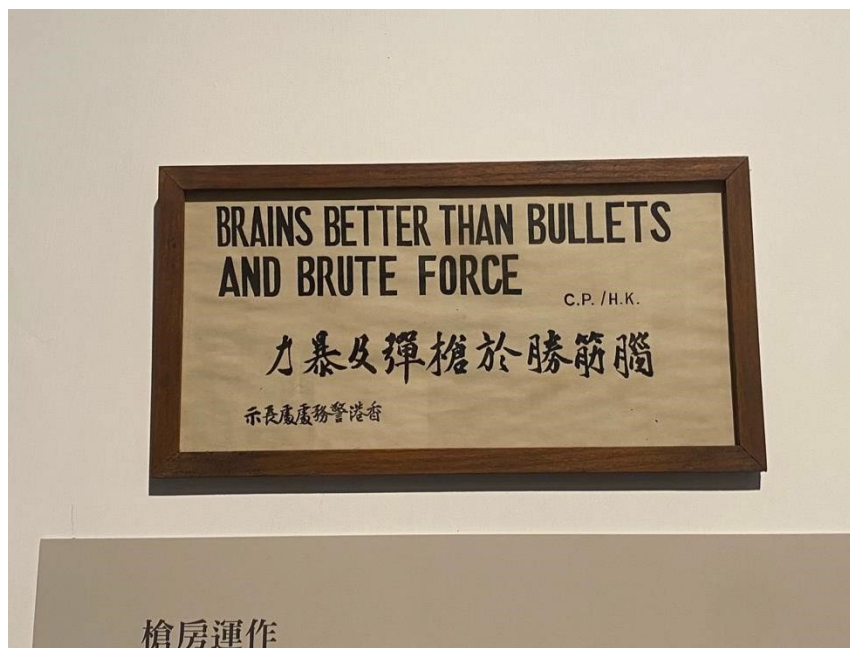
"It's like being sarcastic, which makes people think about how violent the police were in 2019. I just thought that the police couldn't do it, that's why they hang it to the wall to alert them. [...] There is also a video about the 1967 riots. Some police officers on the documentary said that the demonstrators were very violent, but could not fight back if they were beaten by the demonstrators. I really doubt whether what he said is true, because it is so different from what I saw in 2019" (「有啲諷刺，令人諗起 19

年啲警察幾咁暴力。我就係度諗係咪因為啲警察做唔到，所以先要掛係度提醒佢地。[...]仲有條片度講六七暴動，啲警察話示威者好暴力，但佢地唔可以打人唔可以還口，被示威者打都唔可以還手。好懷疑佢講嘢真唔真，因為同我 19 年見到嘅好大分別。」)

Cherry, female, 22

**Figure 32**

*Slogan Hanging on the Wall at the Armoury*



Cherry's skepticism toward the historical accounts presented was a direct reflection of her experience within the sociopolitical context in Hong Kong. The slogan she saw stood in stark contrast to her memories of the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests, leading her to

question the authenticity and bias of the historical narratives presented. Her experience is a performative act of questioning and challenging the official narrative.

An interviewee expressed anger and frustration when an exhibit reminded him of some darker sides of Hong Kong history,

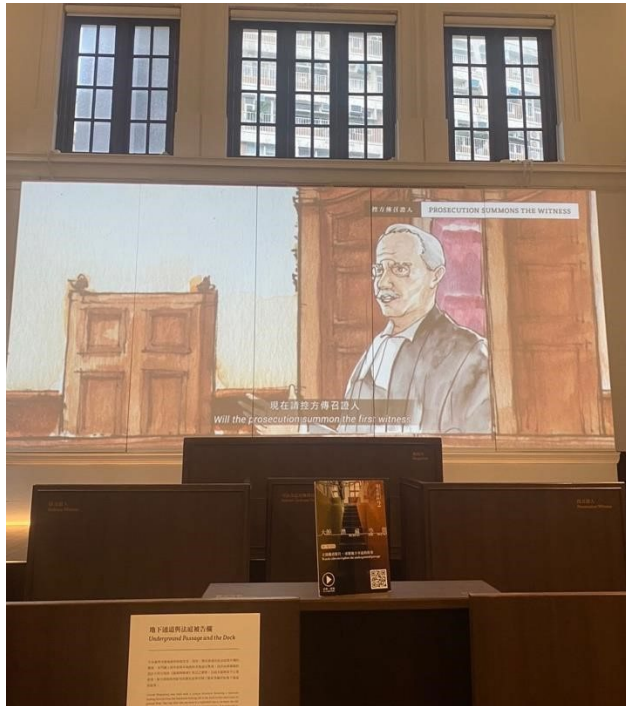
“Isn’t that ridiculous that a Chinese had to be judged by a foreigner in English? The Brits never treated us well, and the Chinese were oppressed to the point they couldn’t even speak out. [...] now people say how good it was when they ruled, but it’s only the young people who never experienced it” (「一個中國人犯咗事竟然要由個鬼佬嚟判，仲要講埋晒啲雞腸，你話好唔好笑。英國人根本未對我地好過，啲華人被人恰到上心口都無得出聲。[...] 依家啲人係咁話以前比英國佬管個陣有幾好，係啲後生仔未經歷過先唔知咋！」)

Mr. Chan, male, 83

Mr. Chan’s anger was rooted in his memories of colonial rule and his perception of historical injustices against the Chinese population. When he saw the animated video of a British judge adjudicating a Chinese criminal, the scenario reinforced his identity as a Chinese who experienced colonial discrimination (see Figure 33). His reaction was a performative expression of resistance against nostalgia for colonial rule that he perceived as prevalent among some segments of Hong Kong society.

**Figure 33**

*Animation Recreating the First Case Heard at Central Magistracy*



Another respondents found the most relatable part of the exhibitions as a recording between a prison guard and a prisoner:

“the most resonant one is in the cells. I heard the voice of a prison guard calling an inmate by his number. It’s like a signature scene in an old Hong Kong film, like *Prison on Fire*. [...] The prison guards are brutal [...] ” 「最有共鳴係監倉個度。我記得有把聲係度嗌幾多幾多號囚犯，應該係個獄警係度叫。好有親切感，似電影入面啲情節，監獄風雲咁。[...] 啲獄警係蝦蝦霸霸㗎啦[...]」

Jason, male, 32



Jason's experience showed how products of media culture affect his understanding of historical context. He performed an exploration of a specific Hong Kong cultural identity--one that recognized and internalized representations from local cinema.

The act of visiting heritage like Tai Kwun is in itself a subtle participation in producing an alternative discourse. Through their engagement with the site, visitors perform their understanding of history and relate that history to themselves. While the understanding of history is influenced by the social, political, and cultural environment, they are the key factors in determining how people deal with history and their identity. They recognized different aspects of Hong Kong history through the site and asserted their identities. They illustrated how Tai Kwun becomes a stage for the performance of memory and identity. Visitors' engagement with the site and their interpretation are active experiences shaped by the sociopolitical context of Hong Kong. By using historical and cultural cues, they construct and assert their own identities and values.

Going back to our earlier question, do these performative acts diverge from the official discourse, or even challenge them? I think the answer is yes.

The slogan "Brains better than bullets and brute force" presumably aims to project an image of the police force as wise, restrained, and preferring intelligence-led approaches over violence. This narrative seeks to instill a sense of respect and trust in law enforcement, possibly emphasizing a historical progression towards more civilized policing methods. The inclusion of the 1967 riots and the portrayal of police officers as victims of violence by demonstrators are likely intended to evoke sympathy for the police and to frame them as upholders of order during chaotic times, further legitimating their role in society. However, Cherry perceived the slogan as ironic, pointing out that it is more of a reminder or a failed

aspiration rather than a statement of fact. She also doubted the accuracy of the historical narrative on the 1967 riots.

While the official narrative focuses on the positive aspects brought by British rule, i.e., the legal system, Mr. Chan remembered the darker aspects of colonial rule such as exploitation and suppression of local people. This directly challenged the narrative that portray the colonial legal system as fair.

Jason's mention of the guards being "brutal" reflects an understanding of the complex nature of prison life. This shows empathy and a comprehensive understanding of the role's individuals play within institutional frameworks, which might be overlooked or simplified by the official narrative. While the official narrative always only highlights some "important big men", such as the first Magistrate William Caine, Jason's understanding of history include those ordinary people.

## **4.2 Reshaping Meaning through Social Media**

When I asked interviewee which parts they found relatable, some responses I got were very interesting, mostly from younger generations. They said that they just came here for "Instagrammable" photos and did not explore any exhibitions or the history about the site. Tiffany and Sarah said that they were attracted to Tai Kwun because *Seventeen*, a K-pop boy group whom they idolized, had been here.

" We like *Seventeen*, they shot a music video here, so we wanted to get the same style. Plus, there are many beautiful spots here, perfect for Instagram. The influencers also come here to take photos." (「我地鍾意 *Seventeen*, 佢地之前有係度拍 mv, 想嚟

get 同款！同埋呢度好多位都好靚，好啱打卡，IG 啲 KOL 都係度影相。」)

"I wasn't aware, I only knew this place used to be a police station, didn't know there was a prison too. [...] I'm somewhat interested in the prison, but probably won't go see the police station part; I don't really want to know the history of the police." (「無留意喎，淨係知呢度以前係差館，唔知有監獄㗎。[...]監獄有啲興趣嘅，但應該唔會去睇差館，我都唔想知警察嘅歷史。」)

Tiffany, 17, student

Rather than engaging with the historical exhibitions, Tiffany and Sarah chose to engage with the site as a backdrop for social media photos. They interpreted the site and its meaning and significance on the basis of its aesthetic appeal and its association with pop culture (the K-pop group), instead of its historical value. When they post these photos on social media platforms, they exert their influence, since it potentially attracts more visitors who might view the site similarly. This broadens the site's appeal, transforming it from a space primarily serving and catering to middle-class patrons attending art exhibitions or concerts to a more inclusive venue that welcomes a diverse crowd drawn by its visual and cultural appeal.

To conclude, all responses documented in section 4.1 and 4.2 demonstrate visitors' agency of engagement. The selective engagement they performed, such as Mr. Chan's focus on the dark side of colonial history and Tiffany's focus on the aesthetic value rather than the historical value of the site, showed visitors' agency to interact with, interpret, and influence Tai Kwun. As a result, even though the heritage regime, i.e., the Hong Kong Jockey Club

establishes a hegemonic discourse through the exhibitions and amenities cater to middle-class, individuals still have the ability to define the significance of Tai Kwun.

### **4.3 Alternative Tours**

Tai Kwun offers guided tours every day. To understand deeper how it represents the historical significance of the site, I signed up for the tour. The tour lasted for 45 minutes. It was a very general introduction of the site led by a trained docent, and covered various topics, from the history of the site to the revitalization and conservation effort and the architectural significance of different buildings. The tour follows the same discourse as the heritage exhibitions, as we discussed in Chapter 2. At the beginning of the tour, the docent drew our attention to a certificate framed on the wall at the Visitor Center, where the tour started (see Figure 34). This is the certificate of the site winning the Award of Excellence of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural heritage Conservation. AHD often emphasizes heritage validated by recognized institutions; in this case, UNESCO. The presentation of an award by such a prestigious body aligns with AHD by reinforcing the idea that the value and significance of heritage sites are best acknowledged through formal, often Western-centric institutions. This promotes a singular, top-down and elite driven view of what is significant in conserving the heritage, thus overshadowing some local viewpoints and interpretations of values of the site. Moreover, the tour resembles the exhibition content in mentioning “big men’s” names. Peter Godber was one of the names. As the case of Godber, bribery was heard at the Central Magistracy, when introducing this part, she added a fact that is not mentioned in the exhibition, that this case caused the establishment of HKICAC. She also mentioned names like Limpy Ho and Ho Chi-Mihn, who were imprisoned in Victoria Prison. These

reflected a masculine-centered vision of history, of which men are the makers of history, and their history deserved to be documented or commemorated. After the tour, I asked the docent whether they could decide the flow and the content of the tour. She said that they were given script and can only follow the route as designed by the bosses.

“Sometimes I want to include some additional facts, but I can’t. Finishing the script in 45 minutes is already very challenging and our bosses don’t like us going overtime.

They always say we don’t manage our time well.” (「有時想得意啲自己講多啲額外嘅嘢都唔得，本身 9 個字要行曬成個 tour 已經好趕，加上啲上頭唔鍾意我地超時，成日話我地唔跟時間做嘢。」)

This indicates a centralized control of the narrative over what aspects of heritage are highlighted and how they are interpreted. Also, by restricting docents to a script, the heritage authority limits their ability to bring personal insights, alternative histories or local knowledge into the narrative. As a consequence, visitors can only get to know the authorized version of history.

**Figure 34**

*Certificate of the Award Presented by UNSECO*



Other than this official guided tour offered by the heritage management Jockey Club, there are tours held by other private organizations, schools, and NGOs. The participants of these private tours are diverse, including locals and tourists, kindergarten students and the elderly. I interviewed some of these participants about the tours they joined, and I found that most of these tours provided a narrative similar to the official one. Their topics varied, including architectural styles, urban planning, and colonial history, yet they did not tend to provide a fresh angle to examine the site and its significance.

Among these private tours, only one told history that fell out of the authorized version history and challenged the hegemonic discourse. The tour focused on the dark side of the Hong Kong Police Force during the 1950s to the 70s, when bribery and corruption were prevalent. According to the participants, Man Yee and her mother Nancy, the tour explained the historical context in the colonial and post-war setting, some major incidents and notable figures, and the reform and establishment of the ICAC. They both agreed that the tour was

interesting, especially the part about police charging people protection money and the case of Lui Lok, a detective known for his acts of corruption.

“A few years ago, I often heard the saying ‘good guys don't become cops’, not realizing it had been around for a long time. Movies often talk about how corrupt the police were in the past, but I never seriously tried to understand the details. Today, I feel like I have a clearer understanding of the context.” (「早幾年成日聽好仔唔當差呢句說話，唔知原來以前就有。電影都成日講以前警察貪污好犀利，但就唔係好認真咁去了解咩事，今日覺得成個脈絡清晰咗。」)

Man Yee, female, 21

“In the past, the older generation would refer to police officers as “licensed thugs.” I was born in the late '70s, so that era isn't too far from my time, and people might have become accustomed to corruption as something normal. But hearing about it today feels different from when I was younger; it brings new perspectives. [...] Police don't necessarily represent justice, and I think that apart from the Independent Commission Against Corruption, there should be other independent bodies to oversee things” (「以前都會聽舊個輩叫差佬做有牌爛仔。我係七幾年出世，都唔係話離嗰個年代好遠，啲人可能已經慣咗貪污係一件約定俗成嘅事。但今日聽返，同細細個聽感覺又唔同，有新嘅感覺囉。[...]差佬唔一定代表正義，我覺得除咗廉署之外要有一啲獨立機構去把關。」)

Nancy, female, 45

This alternative tour provided a very different narrative from the exhibition, as well as the tour. While the official narrative seeks to legitimize the law enforcement system and put the law enforcer in a heroic light, the alternative narrative uncovered the less glamorous aspects of the site's history. This omitted part in the formal discourse not only offered a fresh angle but also encouraged the audience to reflect critically on issues of governance and authority. This has the potential to prompt broader discussions on how societies might need to reform and oversee the governance structures and their law enforcement to prevent the recurrence of past mistakes. Overall, such alternative historical narrative played a crucial role in democratizing history, making it a field not just of facts to be passively consumed but an arena for active engagement, questioning, and dialogue. This challenged the power structures that seek to maintain control over public memory and identity by dictating what is remembered and how it is interpreted.



## **Conclusion**

This research has explored how Tai Kwun, a heritage site that possesses an educational function and potentially a social inclusion function, influences and is influenced by visitors. This issue is examined from a gender perspective to analyze how power dynamics intersect with these interactions and cultural performances at the site.

Instead of demonstrating a homogenous discourse, Tai Kwun is a medium through which diverse narratives and performances are expressed. The examination of official exhibitions already shows the dichotomous narratives: the dominant narrative that asserts power and control by government authorities and a counter-narrative that challenges this hegemonic discourse by including the voices of inmates, who represent a marginalized group in society often facing stigmatization. At the same time, the space configuration and usage also reveal an exclusive discourse which tends to serve individuals of higher socioeconomic status, suggesting a disparity in how the space is accessible and utilized across people of different social status. This setting points to inequality in the supposed inclusiveness of the site. Despite these structural limitations, the behavior of visitors at Tai Kwun indicates that they engage with the site as active agents. Visitors do not merely absorb the narratives presented; they actively interpret, understand, and shape the values associated with the space. This active engagement demonstrates the capacity of visitors to challenge and redefine the intended uses and meanings of the site, highlighting the dynamic interaction between the space and its users.

From this study, we gain insights into the interplay between heritage, gender and power dynamics that might help us to consider the management of other heritage sites. The

coexistence of different narratives and power structures at Tai Kwun provides a glimpse into the ongoing negotiations of memory, power, and identity, often mediated through gendered power structures. For instance, Tai Kwun's narrative, which asserts control, may perpetuate traditional masculine notions of authority and power. This prompts reflections on the need to engage alternative and diverse perspectives. More importantly, it prompts evaluation of what prevent them from being accessible and relevant to all segments of society and how to become truly inclusive spaces.

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