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Villagers in the New Territories are fighting to preserve their way of life—through music

by Karen Cheung



Standing in Kwu Tung, looking at Shenzhen.
Michael CW Chiu, Still / Loud

Freedom or disappearance.

On one of the hottest weekends in August 2017, just after indie favourite Silhungmo rocked the stage at wow and flutter’s music festival in West Kowloon, a group of performers sang about topics rarely touched upon in local music: the freedom and tranquility of life in the countryside, the beauty of trees with crimson flowers, and the destruction brought by corporations colluding with the Hong Kong government.

This unlikely group—known as Fragrant Village 香村—is made up of 23 musicians and northeast New Territories villagers that hail from Kwu Tung North 古洞北, Ma Shi Po 馬屎埔 in Fanling North 粉嶺北, and Ping Che 坪輦 / Ta Kwu Ling 打鼓嶺. Underneath the poetic verses celebrating rural life and the soothing tones of handpan music, the villagers remind us of a harsh reality: soon, to make way for large-scale housing projects, their homes will be demolished.

One of the villagers who could soon be facing eviction is Wah Gor, who was born in Kwu Tung; his great-grandparents, too, lived in the village. His story inspired Fragrant Village to write the song “Dreamless Kwu Tung” as part of their 2016 album.

We first met Wah Gor and the Fragrant Village team at a coffee shop, and later he brought us to Kwu Tung, introducing us to his family, showing us the village’s soy sauce factories, and taking us on a hike for the best view of the countryside.

“This is the place that brought up our whole family, where our roots are,” Wah Gor says. His family moved several times in the village, once even witnessing their house torn down during a particularly bad storm. “We were watching this from under a tree that is still here today,” he adds.

He proudly details the villagers’ survival skills, relationship with the land and the animals, and their close-knit bond with one another—so close that no one locks their doors when heading out. “You cannot put a price on this.”



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If the village is demolished, these stories will lose all physical presence and only exist in the imagination, Wah Gor says. And because what is destroyed is largely intangible—such as what he calls “fifty years of love” in the song—very few people outside the village would pay attention.

“We’re not young anymore, and we’re so used to our way of life... we would not be able to compete in the financial city. And city-dwellers cannot experience the freedom we have.”

Fragrant Village is the brainchild of emptyscape, an initiative that seeks to breathe life back into abandoned spaces across Hong Kong. In its 2013 art festival, emptyscape invited alumni of the long-defunct Ping Yeung Public School back to the campus to sing the school anthem. Villagers who lived in the area had all attended the school growing up, and attendees ranged from young adults to people in their sixties.

Sze Ka-yan, a founder of emptyscape, realised there was a story to tell. “I was listening to them sing, and I felt very moved—music is so important, it can bring people back together,” she says. “I started thinking about how we can connect a place, its people, and their stories, and how music can be relevant to a location.”

“I gradually understood the reasons for their resistance, and that it was important for Hong Kongers to realise we need this land and not just have ‘development,’” Sze says. “From Ping Che, you can look across to the buildings in Shenzhen and you wonder: do we really want all of Hong Kong to look like that?”

Development plans for northeast New Territories (NENT) were first introduced in 2007, but things did not come to a head until August 2012, when angry villagers protested outside a town hall meeting over what they called a “fake” consultation process. In 2014, when the project was up for preliminary funding, activists took part in a series of sit-ins and stormed the Legislative Council.

While Ping Che was removed from development plans, the other two areas were not spared. In 2016 Henderson Land Development successfully obtained an injunction to repossess Ma Shi Po village in Fanling; protesters and villagers were made to leave the land and some were arrested during clashes. In 2016, several houses in Kwu Tung were suddenly bulldozed, leaving its residents homeless.

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Edmund Leung, who plays for Fragrant Village (and is best known for his handpan music at The Interzone Collective), muses that the fate of the village is always decided in the city. The rural is inescapably tied to the urban, and it then becomes the responsibility of artists to “package” the issue and bring it into the city.

To that end, Fragrant Village released their ten-track self-titled album in early 2016. Recording took place on site in the New Territories, and villagers collaborated with familiar names such as The Interzone Collective and MC Yan. Since then, they have performed at festivals such as Clockenflap and even Taiwan’s Megaport Festival in Kaohsiung.

“Music is a tool that enables you to [bring issues into the city] and influences how decisions are made,” Leung says—but what city-dwellers do with this new information is beyond the artists’ control.

Sze says her hope for Fragrant Village is to create a platform for human stories, though it’s a “very naïve way” of going about it.

“If it can show the truth and [listeners] could be encouraged to think more, different voices could join discussions and something would blossom—I think that’s most important,” she says.

On August 15 2017, just days after Fragrant Village performed at West Kowloon, Hong Kong’s appeal court imprisoned 13 demonstrators who had fought for the rights of affected villagers; their appeals are scheduled to be heard at the Court of Final Appeal this September.

Coincidentally, that same week the court jailed three prominent Umbrella Movement activists, and thousands flowed onto the streets in protest of both rulings. But many within the social activism community have commented privately that the celebrity status of Joshua Wong drew attention away from the land activists, and the public remains unaware of the situation.

From Ping Che, you can look across to the buildings in Shenzhen and you wonder: do we really want all of Hong Kong to look like that? Wah Gor says the government never reflected on why the land activists resorted to clashes.

“We tried different methods over many years to make society show concern towards the incident. We had hoped that more people could urge the government to deal with this,” Wah Gor says. However, instead of facing the problem directly, the government employed “special means” to stop and threaten activists, he adds.

For now, it appears to be the calm before the storm. Villagers have heard rumours that the government may soon apply for funding for development again, and many have been making preparations. Wah Gor hopes that the imprisonment of protestors can serve as a warning to Hong Kong people: if you remain silent or choose to stay unaware, this too might happen to you.

眼看我一切珍視的 / 都快將消失 / 我想 我應該為這一切盡一點力 / 即使未必有用 / 即使徒勞無功 / 至少能找到一點繼續生存的價值
—“Freedom or Disappearance”, Tsui Chin Hung and Chan Suk Fung

