

(Ming Pao via [InMediaHK](#)) By Lung Ying-tai. Speech delivered at Hong Kong University on June 2, 2006.

I know that "a guest should have polite manners." I know that "I am not a Hong Kong person and therefore I don't know Hong Kong." I completely agree that "your Taiwan is even worse." Therefore, to quote a phrase from Bus Uncle, the subject of this speech for me is really like "I've got pressure." But I believe that the people of Hong Kong will tolerate well-meaning honest comments.

What is the origin of the term Tamar? I asked ten Hong Kong persons and none of them knew.

So I did some research. HMS Tamar was a English navy ship built in 1863 -- at a time when the Boxers were in rebellion and a civil war was taking place in the United States. This was a 3,650-tonne three-mast troop carrier. After 1897, the boat remained in Victoria Harbor and became the mainstay of the navy based in Hong Kong. In 1941, during the battle to defend Hong Kong against the Japanese military invasion, the English soldiers retreated to Hong Kong island. The government ordered all the ships in the harbor to be destroyed so that the Japanese could not use them. HMS Tamar was one of those sunken ships. On the website of the naval prisoners-of-war, I found the diary of the soldier who was ordered to sink HMS Tamar:

On December 11, the navy was very busy. All the ships were sent over to Kowloon to ferry the retreating forces. At 19:00, the lieutenant ordered me to pick up the wounded at Stonecutters Island. At the time, Stonecutters Island had been continuously bombarded for twenty-four hours already. I picked up three wounded persons on stretchers as well as some other wounded soldiers who were still able to walk. At 21:00pm, I received the order to sink HMS Tamar ... the night was very dark. There was no light at all. There was a huge risk in launching a torpedo ... the first torpedo that I launched missed its target.

On the same page, there was a short message. The grandfather of the author was a sailor on HMS Tamar. Her question was: "My grandfather was on HMS Tamar the whole time. In the end, he died in the Lisbonmaru disaster. Can anyone tell me how he lived on HMS Tamar?"

After the war, the Hong Kong government salvaged the HMS Tamar. Some of the wooden boards brought up from the bottom of the sea were supposedly used for the front gates of St. John's Cathedral.

The sunken remnants of war at the bottom of the water was used to capture religious sentiments that look up at the skies.

Once you know the blood-and-tears history of HMS Tamar, it is very difficult to remain indifferent to HMS Tamar.

But how come most Hong Kong do not know these histories, as if they don't care about their own history? This does not appear to be a natural indifference, but more likely to have been cultivated by colonial education. Colonialism brought material results and modernization, but it also deprived the colonized people of any refined sensitivity towards history as well as self-respect.

Today's HMS Tamar is obviously just seawater at the spot where the former HMS Tamar used to be moored. After the landfills, there was one extra piece of unoccupied land in the center of the area running from Central to Admiralty. This space was named HMS Tamar to commemorate the war years of Hong Kong. During those years of "temporarily unoccupied" status, HMS Tamar "accidentally" became a people's plaza in Hong Kong. 14,000 people sat under clear skies and shared a mass meal; 5,000 people sat there and made tea; 4,000 people sat shoulder to shoulder to watch an open-air movie under starlight. This piece of "open" land could not have lasted long in the ever-calculating Hong Kong. So the government has decided to build a Government Headquarters here. Of the 4.2 hectares of land, 2 hectares will be put aside for a "leisure plaza" and the other half will be used to construct four government buildings, each about 30 to 40 stories tall. How big is that? The total area of the space is equivalent to the sum of Exchange Square Phases 1 and 2. Total construction costs? HK\$ 5.2 billion.

people are so "dismissive" about, there would be many people yelling "It is not resolved" about the many problems associated with the "Tamar plan" that was offered by Donald Tsang.

Sample question one: Why does the government headquarters have to move? Is the average office space really "seriously short"? How is the "shortage" of the average office space being measured? How does that compare with government office space in other cities? What are the results? How does this compare to average office space in the civilian sector? If the information is blank here, then how can it be established that office space is "in shortage"?

Sample question two: Suppose the data established that office space was "in shortage," then can high-tech telecommunications systems compensate for it? When video and Internet information is getting better every day, should the traditional definition of the need for "office space" be given a mean meaning? Has any research been done? Can it be shown that technology will not compensate for the need for physical space?

Sample question three: Suppose it can be shown scientifically that the average office space is in "shortage," then there should be a comparative analysis of whether to continue to rent civilian commercial space, or expand the original government facilities, or move to a new space and build from scratch. Can the economic effect, environmental impact and sustainable development of these three options be placed under the sunshine for the scholars to challenge, the media to monitor and the people to accept?

Sample question four: Suppose the preceding analysis leads to the conclusion that moving and rebuilding is better, then which is the ideal location? Why is it not Southeast Kowloon, where construction is very much needed? Why not allocate the resources to New Territories which need attention? Why not just use the Cyberport which has a stunningly low usage rate? Why not the long-abandoned Sai Wan abattoir? Why does it have to be HMS Tamar? Where are the scientific data and persuasion?

Sample question five: If the government headquarters is chosen to be at HMS Tamar, then what is the plan for southeastern Kowloon? What is the future for the government hill historical sites? What is the detailed connection between the land-filled Central harbor front corridor and HMS Tamar? What about West Kowloon? What about the Sai Wan abattoir?

From the information disclosed by the government, these fundamental questions did not have even the most superficial answers. But the HK\$5.2 billion budget was approved by the Legislature almost without dissent. The various political parties, apart from the Civic Party, quickly went into silence. A small number of NGO's could only ask the government to display the models after the bidders submit their proposals. The government did not need to respond to any of the inquiries about the fundamental questions -- besides, nobody was asking anyway; and it does not have to make any promises in black-and-white. Even after it promised to produce the models after the bid, the government emphasized that this will be "an exception." The people will not be allowed to give their opinion, for the government is already giving the people a lot of "face" in a "compromise."

The Hong Kong government is powerful and the people are docile.

I do not mean to say that a powerful government is always bad. Many governments may be jealous of the Hong Kong government: its budget is high (Hong Kong's budget is eight times that of Taipei), its dominance is strong and the social forces are weak. A powerful government likes to display its strengths through large-scale projects, because these projects are the most visible accomplishments.

The attempt by the Hong Kong government to "rouse itself vigorously to build a prosperous city" is obvious: the government has just announced the proposed plan for the Central new harbor front, claiming that it wants to "construct an admirable recreational space and a commercial center" and to "develop a world-class harbor front that will symbolize Hong Kong." There will be three clusters of commercial buildings next to the Star Ferry Terminal, including a 28-story commercial building, an 18-story hotel with "unbeatable harbor views" and a 9-story tall but longer than 400 meters building. Apart from this "world-class harbor front," the 40-hectare West Kowloon project is in the planning stages; HMS Tamar will have a group of government office buildings; and so on. This is not even including the various developments at Lantau Island and the various plans for the trans-border bridges.

and long-range, macroscopic eyes. In front of the rumbling bulldozer, we must place a fragile, soft and beautiful small flower.

This fragile, soft and beautiful small flower carries this reminder:

In urban planning, pulling one hair can affect the entire body.

For Victoria Harbor, the buildings along the Central harbor front corridor will change the "face of Hong Kong" totally -- the world-famous romantic Victoria Harbor view. Imagine that you are standing in the middle of the water in the harbor and then you make a 360 degree viewing of all sides of Victoria Harbor. From West Kowloon, Tsim Sha Tsui, Tsim Tung, Causeway Bay, Admiralty, Central, Sheung Wan and all the way back to West Kowloon again. The crossing of the entire view, color, shadow, ridgeline and horizon and the complimentary and harmonious beauty of the harbor and the buildings -- was there a fully considered anticipation of what might happen? Or was each harbor front project isolated, partial and accidental based upon the development needs of that moment?

The historical sites on government hill is the only remaining ones in complete colonial styles. Donald Tsang is simply unwilling to promise to protect them. If these historical sites should be razed one day to become real estate land measured by the number of dollars per square foot, can the people of Hong Kong endure this treatment of their own history? If the sites are preserved, then how does one fill up the HK\$5.2 billion for HMS Tamar?

If none of these issues have been considered yet -- then, oh bulldozer, why are you in such a hurry?

When the principals use "world-class," "landmark" and "spirit of Hong Kong" to describe their attempt to "rouse oneself vigorously to build a prosperous city," can we not hear a small and peaceful voice asking: Why does Hong Kong need a 'landmark'? 'World-class' compared to whom? What is the 'spirit of Hong Kong'?

If a city such as Bilbao which only has ordinary citizen lives but no unique architecture needs modern architecture as landmarks, then the landmark-filled Hong Kong really needs the sediments of ordinary civilian life and the tender care for the small streets, lanes and old markets so that the sense of "popular culture" becomes thicker and sweeter. We don't need more "landmarks" that are tall and magnificent.

As for 'world-class,' against whom is this comparison being made? Is it the likes of New York City, London, Paris and Berlin once more? Question one: Why compare with them? The basic infrastructure of Hong Kong is better than all of them. The cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong is better than Berlin. Public security in Hong Kong cannot be matched by New York City. The legendary history of Hong Kong is even more colorful than that of London. Hong Kong itself is "world-class," so where does this sense of inferiority come from such that "world-class" has to be continuously invoked to make people feel better?

Question two: If a comparison has to be made, then does Hong Kong still want to be compared with these cities for "world-class" hardware projects"? At what point in time will you finally start to compare with other people on "content"? Why won't you make a "world-class" comparison with Paris and London on historical sites, ancient streets, old mills, the culture-filled Left Bank and the artistic villages located in garages and factories?

Will the representative of the "spirit of Hong Kong" still be the hotel with the "unbeatable harbor view"? Or the shopping commercial buildings all over the city? 'Who' created this definition for the meaning of "spirit of Hong Kong"? The real estate developers? Or the people of Wanchai, Sai Wan, Tuen Mun or Sham Shui Po?

The location of HMS Tamar is in the heart of Hong Kong. It is the stage from which Hong Kong faces the world. When the lights come on, the charming pose of Hong Kong is radiant and splendid. Please, can you put just anything on that stage?

In feudal times, the nobles used money and absolute authority to build palaces. So palaces became the core of the city. In a modern society, the government is a "public servant" for the people -- it is warehouse, engine room, kitchen, accountant's office, abattoir, and service quarters. Who would

For people who have been to many cities, there is a certain indicator: when the city government is magnificent in the heart of the city, it usually implies a politically dominating system. If the sovereignty is with the people and the civic forces are stronger, then the government building is usually humble and plain in the spirit of "public servants" not wanting to boast about their power. Do we know where the city governments of New York City, Berlin and London are located? Do they occupy the center stage of the city?

Therefore, how about moving the government headquarters to the Sai Wan abattoir site? The abattoir is appropriate to the "public servant" status of the government, and the old and worn-down Sai Wan needs community rejuvenation, right?

The most striking thing in Central is the People's Liberation Army building. To put the army in the most brilliant center stage of Hong Kong to the world is like putting your armory in living room. Can you imagine that Paris would station its army at the Louvre? The British used to do that in Hong Kong in order to display their colonial power -- the arrogance of their intention was obvious. Is this necessary today? Apart from looking weird, the revelation of the violent meaning will draw negative interpretations. What the Donald Tsang government needs to do most of all is to move the PLA out of Central and return the harbor front to the people. But it didn't do that. Instead it attempted to build an even bigger government building at HMS Tamar in the name of creating an "iconic civic core."

In many other cities, the citizens would be demonstrating out in the streets already. In a civic society, the "spirit" of the city could not possibly be a city government building. It may be an opera house, like Sydney. It may be a museum, like Paris. It may be a place for the artists, like New York City. It may be old streets, old lanes, old temples and old trees, like Beijing. It may be an ancient historical bridge, like Prague. But no city would treat the city government (a power organization or service area) as its spiritual icon.

Victoria Harbor's Central is the face of Hong Kong as seen by the whole world. That face is really infinitely charming. But does Hong Kong want the world to see a city government building?

No matter how one looks at it, putting the government building at HMS Tamar makes one feel that this is a power that does not know humility and restraint.

Better suited for the "spirit of Hong Kong" is more than 10,000 sharing a pot meal under the clear skies; or 5,000 people happily making tea and listening to music; or 4,000 people watching an open-air movie shoulder-to-shoulder, crying and laughing. When the world sees that Hong Kong is not only the same old hotels and commercial buildings and not the cold and indifferent buildings, and the world sees the people of Hong Kong leading ordinary lives -- happy people, sad people, people making tea, people eating, people chasing kites on a stroll, people demonstrating angrily, people crying from emotions, people encouraging each other -- then they will see a city with lively content and unique personality. That would be the true "world-class" "spirit of Hong Kong"?

Money is not the only standard by which to assess social progress. A four hectare public plaza may be foregoing real estate land measured in dollars per square foot, but can the image of Hong Kong in the world be measured in terms of Hong Kong or American dollars? Can the deep cultural identity and group awareness created by a plaza where they sing and cry be calculated on a per-square-foot basis?

On November 9, 2004, in the same place today, I raised some questions about West Kowloon. At that time, the following was said:

In Hong Kong, the key consideration in all policy decisions is economic benefits, and development is the only ideology. The meaning of "ideological formation" is that it has become an obstinate belief. People no longer doubt or question the logic of its existence. The result is, Do you think that Hong Kong is diversified? No. It is extremely boring, because the whole city is monopolized by a certain oneness of commercial logic. The appearances of the commercial buildings and the streets are the most obviously examples: no matter whether you are at Festival Walk, Pacific Place or Exchange Square, you have the same architecture, the same shops, the same merchandise, the same flavor and the same "Welcome" tone. In the sparkling and slick corridors, you see the merchandise but not the people. For the merchandise, you see the same brands over

If you just walk through these commercial buildings, you will get this impression: Hong Kong has everything, except a personality.

Two years have gone by. The fate of West Kowloon is uncertain, there are plans to have massive construction on the Central harbor front, the HMS Tamar project is ready to do and the government hill historical sites are endangered. The city of Hong Kong is undergoing tremendous changes. But very, very few people in society care. Two months ago, I asked a group of about 50 university students whether they know about the HMS Tamar situation, and only one or two said that they knew.

In my opinion, cultural sovereignty is not a just about political manifestations such as the June 4th sit-in and the July 1st march, or the mental tug-of-war between Beijing and Hong Kong. To be concerned about what Hong Kong will leave for the next generation is an even more critical manifestation of cultural sovereignty. But the positions of the political parties are wavering, the NGOs are weak and dispersed and the university students seem to be unaware of or indifferent to social issues. When the students graduate, they join the government, become part of the bureaucratic system and begin the domineering governance.

Chen Guanzhong has an essay that I think the people of Hong Kong must read in order to understand themselves, or for outsiders to understand Hong Kong people. It is titled "The Hong Kong people of my generation." This is how he describes the generation that is now in their 40's or 50's, and these people are the social mainstream:

Our long-term education has finally made us remember that it is this kind of education -- there are no considerations with any principles, no baggage from ideals, no pressure from history, nothing that requires the pursuit of perfection or a long-term view or a broad macroscopic view. This has become the thinking of the whole society: we believe that we are good at adjusting, we can learn and do anything, we use the most efficient methods, we can pass and deliver in the shortest time, we demand the biggest and quickest results ... another characteristic of our generation is that we do not fight for our collective interests in the public domain, but we will make private arrangements instead... yes, we love money.

The idea of "passing and delivering in the shortest time" may create the effective result in front of our eyes right now, but it prevents macroscopic, long-range and continuous thinking. The docility of "not fighting for our collective rights in the public domain" may make us win in our personal enterprises, but it will sacrifice the progress of society as a whole.

I do not doubt that Donald Tsang loves Hong Kong, but his policies may be wrong. Lung Ying-tai's ideas may also be wrong, but that is not the important point. The important point is civic participation and debate. The important point is when the people of Hong Kong dare to challenge short-term and quick-profit thinking and then take the future of Hong Kong into their own hands instead of letting the elite bureaucrats and land development groups decide the fate of the people and the next generation.

When the citizens regard Hong Kong as their home and take over the responsibility for Hong Kong, that is "cultural sovereignty" and the "spirit of Hong Kong."
