



## Article

# Heterotopic Heritage in Hong Kong: Tai Kwun and Neo-Victorian Carceral Space

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**Abstract:** The prison is specifically identified by Michel Foucault in his essay, 'Of Other Spaces' (1967), as an exemplar of "heterotopias of deviation". Reified in neo-Victorian production as a hegemonic space to be resisted, within which illicit desire, feminist politics, and alternate narratives, for example, flourish under harsh panoptic conditions, the prison nonetheless emerges as a counter-site to both nineteenth-century and contemporary social life. This article investigates the neo-Victorian prison museum that embodies several of Foucault's heterotopic principles and traits from heterochronia to the dynamics of illusion, compensation/exclusion and inclusion that structure the relationship of heterotopic space to all space. Specifically, I explore the heritage site of the Central Police Station compound in Hong Kong, recently transformed into "Tai Kwun: the Centre for Heritage and the Arts". Tai Kwun ("Big Station" in Cantonese) combines Victorian and contemporary architecture, carceral space, contemporary art, and postcolonial history to herald the transformation of Hong Kong into an international arts hub. Tai Kwun is an impressive example of neo-Victorian adaptive reuse, but its current status as a former prison, art museum, and heritage space complicates the celebratory aspects of heterotopia as counter-site. Instead, Tai Kwun's spatial, historical, and financial arrangements emphasize the challenges that tourism, government funding, heritage, and the art industry pose for Foucault's original definition of heterotopia and our conception of the politics of neo-Victorianism in the present.

**Keywords:** Tai Kwun; Hong Kong; carceral space; heterotopia; postcolonial; prison museum



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## 1. Introduction

The transformation of what is commonly referred to as the Central Police Station compound (CPS) into "Tai Kwun: Center for Heritage and the Arts" marks an important shift in the complexity of neo-Victorian heterotopian spaces in Hong Kong. To be clear, not all the remains of nineteenth-century architecture in the territory (or elsewhere) can be considered neo-Victorian. Rather, to qualify as such, much as Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann have argued of neo-Victorian fiction, a building too needs to be "*self-consciously engaged with the art of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2010, p. 4, emphasis in original). Tai Kwun is an exemplar of how creative adaptive reuse<sup>1</sup> can, for example, speak to the present's appropriation of the nineteenth century past for its own aesthetic and political needs. This article traces Tai Kwun's development from a prison heterotopia, a panopticon deployed for the purposes of colonial discipline and surveillance, to what I will refer to as entangled heterotopias, where the additions of "JC (Jockey Club) Contemporary", the newly designed contemporary arts center, and the "JC Cube" auditorium to the former prison site combine to create a new disciplinary exhibitionary complex. The adaptive reuse of the CPS compound, which consists of three Victorian buildings (the Central Police Station, Central Magistracy, and Victoria Prison) into a prison museum and contemporary art gallery surrounded by privatized public space means that the present ordering of aesthetic objects, spaces and experiences are (re-)enforced by the former carceral system. While JC Contemporary

aestheticizes the former prison, the site, in turn, incarcerates the museum's dedication to artistic process. Thus, a close reading of Tai Kwun's spatiality rewrites the conventional attributes of resistance, otherness and difference in the understanding of heterotopias and emphasizes instead how, in certain contexts, heterotopias can reproduce dominant power relations by intensifying and exaggerating their effects through spatial incongruity. Analysis of Tai Kwun as a neo-Victorian heterotopia also reveals what architecture and space can communicate about "the Victorian" to the public. Tai Kwun, or "Big Station", the Cantonese name colloquially used to refer to the compound, emerges as the largest, most ambitious and, paradoxically, weakest (because it is the most managed or institutionalized) heterotopia in Hong Kong's neo-Victorian landscape.

Neo-Victorian fiction contains many examples of carceral narratives: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), for example, function as fictional reconstructions of historical carceral space and position their female protagonists as carceral subjects. Atwood and Waters demonstrate how spatiality in neo-Victorian novels is crucial to examining the mechanisms of control, power and division that persist into the present, especially for women. Physically and metaphorically incarcerated by nineteenth-century ideologies, women like Grace Marks and Margaret Prior enact the kinds of alliances, opportunities and resistances that thrive under prison conditions. The prison becomes a theater for the ways in which women—then and now—are limited in agency and, in turn, limit that of others. These novels depict their prison settings as enforcements of uniformity and order, where constant surveillance creates conditions of insecurity and where the veneer of legal justice hides a multitude of often sadistic punishments designed to humiliate and deprive. The texts thus take their literary cues and carceral tropes from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault [1976] 1995). Like Foucault, Atwood and Waters pinpoint the nineteenth century as the moment when "the age of sobriety in punishment had begun" (Foucault [1976] 1995, p. 14), a time when the spectacle of punishment and torture disappeared in favor of the prison as a "whole new system of truth and a mass of roles hitherto unknown in the exercise of criminal justice" (Foucault [1976] 1995, p. 23).

In comparison to the prison trope in neo-Victorian literature (cf. Braid 2010; Toron 2011; Hughes-Edwards 2016), relatively little attention has been paid to real, neo-Victorian carceral spaces, their elevation to heritage status and their effect on both a spatial understanding of the neo-Victorian and the definition of heterotopia, a critical blind spot which this article redresses. This study of Tai Kwun also reflects the influence of Foucault's work on neo-Victorian studies and a shift in the dominance of the repressive hypothesis and the panoptic trope in conceptualizations of heterotopia. In this article, I reflect on multiple visits I made to Tai Kwun in 2019 and analyze my experiences within the context of heterotopic spatiality and carceral narratives. Specifically, I explore how Tai Kwun as a prison museum re-orders or disciplines its visitors to experience their spatial relationship to its contemporary art exhibits via a potentially "incarcerated" gaze. This, I conclude, entangles two heterotopic spaces in a postcolonial urban context, in ways that render heterotopia, as a transgressive concept, even more ambiguous and that have significant implications for considering Hong Kong's neo-Victorian heterotopic topography.

## 2. What Is Tai Kwun?: Race, Colonialism and Collective Memory

The construction of Victoria Prison, one of the first durable buildings raised in the new colony in 1841, was followed shortly by the erection of the original Central Magistracy (1847) and the Central Police Station (1864) (PMT 2008, p. 11). Together, this complex of juridical and penal buildings covered a 16-hectare space in what is now the city's Central mid-levels district, bounded by the main thoroughfare of Hollywood Road and the narrow lanes of Arbuthnot Road, Old Bailey Street and Chancery Lane. Occupying what is today a busy mixed residential and commercial neighborhood bordering the Mid-Levels Escalator and the trendy "Soho" area, the CPS originally belonged to a network of colonial administrative and military buildings stretching across the nineteenth-century City of Victoria that formed

the landscape of British colonial power. The CPS buildings constitute the foothold of colonial regulation and control, a testament to the vision and effort of William Caine, the colony's first Chief Magistrate, to curb the "lawlessness" (Tai Kwun 2019) and rampant criminal activity from an influx of Chinese immigrants fleeing imperial law in China [see Figure 1].<sup>2</sup> Architecturally rather unremarkable, CPS is nonetheless notable for its "one-stop approach for law and order", the concentration of the penal system to one power-laden site where "a person could be charged, put on trial, and imprisoned in a single location" (Tai Kwun 2019).

Victoria Prison underwent multiple rebuildings and renovations between 1841 and 1856 in response to overcrowding, shoddy building materials, and squalid conditions. The Central Police Force was established in 1855 and as the Superintendent of Police struggled to professionalize his men, he decided to also update and increase the number of prison cells and add a Debtor's Prison. Between 1851 and 1856, the prison was fortified and extended based on penal reforms and ideas transported from Britain. Structures for prison labor, punishment and execution were included in the new designs, and during this same period, the simple two-story Magistracy building was constructed. In 1858, Victoria Prison was rebuilt based on a half-radial design that illustrated the panopticon's heterotopic potential to order deviance that was significantly different from previous models of criminal ordering and incarceration (PMT 2008, pp. 15–27).

Early records of the prison's design describe what Jane Jacobs has called the "racialized politics of differentiation" (Jacobs 1996, p. 3), played out in the spatial inequalities and sanitary conditions in cells designated for Chinese versus European prisoners. Colonial administrators even believed that Chinese prisoners would be incited to reoffend if they were "more comfortable [in cells] than they would be in common houses of the middling classes of the Chinese" (PMT 2008, p. 15). Similar racial segregation was seen in the plans of the Police Headquarters and the Barracks Block; built in 1864, these buildings were an investment in the rule of law and order in the colony. As Sikh officers and "well conducted" (PMT 2008, p. 27) Chinese locals were recruited to join the Police Force, new dormitories, eating, and worship spaces were required. This racial divide was also writ large across the territorialization of the colony in zoning and property laws that segregated Chinese from Europeans: the history of urban development in Hong Kong is also one of discrimination. Architecturally, these buildings showed the adaptation of European design to the local climate with added verandahs, corridors, and roofing that added to its hybrid style. Whether these buildings held any collective memories for local Hong Kong people beyond architects and participants in the legal system became part of the debate over the direction of Tai Kwun's more recent development.

The entire CPS complex was refurbished over the course of the early twentieth century. The current Central Magistracy, for example, hails from 1913 and was raised on the site of the original Victorian foundations. Many CPS buildings and the prison were partially demolished after the Japanese occupation and bombing of Hong Kong, which reflects the tendency of neo-Victorian texts and archi-texts in Asia to house the double memory of European and Japanese colonialism (Ho 2019, p. 1 and *passim*). In subsequent decades, CPS was expanded to cope with the colony's growth and the changing needs of the police force and prisoners, and in the 1950s, the site was largely redeveloped into a remand prison for immigration purposes. In the 1970s and 80s, Victoria Prison became an over-crowded custodial center for Vietnamese asylum seekers and illegal immigrants in transit or facing repatriation (PMT 2008, p. 48). As detention numbers grew, more attention was paid to physically and discursively separating asylum seekers escaping economic hardship from those fleeing political persecution. In 1995, CPS was declared a Grade 1 historical monument, the highest in the territory's rather toothless conservation system,<sup>3</sup> and, as the CPS buildings gradually degraded over time, discussions began in the early 2000s to convert the CPS compound into a commercial tourist site as part of the area's cultural economic revitalization. Victoria Prison was not decommissioned until 2006 when the



general public was finally allowed behind its doors into an area of Hong Kong that was simultaneously symbolic to and estranged from daily life.



**Figure 1.** Chinese criminals under British “law and order” on display at Tai Kwun. Image author’s own.

### 3. Heritage and the Commodification of Heterotopia

Heritage has become a fraught business since the return of Hong Kong to China by Britain in 1997, and the development of CPS into Tai Kwun is no exception. As the growing pangs of “one country, two systems” began to be felt, urban development projects, gentrification, and heritage conservation began increasingly to be associated with the decolonization process of so-called “mainlandization”, where top-down attempts to change the socio-cultural landscape were perceived as attacks on the value of the local. Discussions of CPS’s adaptive reuse, for example, took place at the same time as the closure and demolition of Queen’s Pier and the adjacent Star Ferry pier for land reclamation in Central in 2006. Often considered to be the moment when collective memory became politicized in Hong Kong’s recent history, the closure of these two piers sparked months-long protests, sit-ins, and a new form of localist activism (Chun 2013). After a few years of consultation and debate, the Hong Kong government set up private tender procedures for the commercial development of the CPS site with a significant portion of space to be reserved for cultural and public use. Following expressions of vehement public sentiment against the pier demolitions and the over-commercialization of nineteenth-century sites such as the Former Marine Police Headquarters in Tsim Sha Tsui, the discussion around the preservation of CPS remained divided between commercial interests and preservationist groups.

Unable to evoke enough strong or “authentic” memories of the site from the public, Agnes Ku has argued that CPS’s cultural meaning and significance were produced, ad hoc, during the tender process as different stakeholders attempted to imbue the site with value in order to sway public or official opinion in a particular direction (Ku 2010, p. 383). Perhaps realizing this lack, the first Tai Kwun exhibition in 2018, “100 Faces of Tai Kwun”, attempted to introduce and humanize the site with an interactive immersion into one hundred stories collected from “kai fongs” (neighbors) of CPS (Retail Design Blog 2018). In her extensive analysis of the tender process as a battleground between commercial and non-commercial uses that heritage can be put to, Ku describes the various narratives that dominated the revitalization of CPS. Given that access to the prison compound was dependent on one’s status as a criminal, a detainee or an agent of the state, the “rule of law” emerged as the de facto narrative without opposition from more local or personal stories of the site (Ku 2010, pp. 390–91). The story of the “rule of law” that dominated discussions of CPS merely reiterated the typical Hong Kong success story of colonialism as the originator of the city’s progress, modernization and the foundation of an urban civilization without addressing the role of local agency, racial biases, corruption, and legal injustices, not to mention human rights. When the non-profit Hong Kong Jockey Club, the city’s largest charitable organization, was named to head the revitalization project in 2007, a happy medium was reached between the public’s resistance towards commercialization and business interests in the conversion of some parts of the site for high-end retail and entertainment (Ku 2010, p. 398). Taking advantage of allowances in the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance, the stunning addition of what is now the JC Cube auditorium and the JC Contemporary gallery and museum, designed jointly by renowned architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, complemented the heritage buildings and completed the design. After significant delays due to a building collapse during the renovation process, Tai Kwun: Center for Heritage and Arts finally opened its doors in 2017, heralded as a “place of inspiration, stimulation, and enjoyment for all Hong Kong people” (Tai Kwun 2019).

With multiple entrances from the Mid-levels Escalator, Hollywood Road, Old Bailey Street and Arbuthnot Road, visitors enter Tai Kwun using the same gates as past prisoners, police officers, and citizens reporting crimes. Labyrinthine in layout, the site sits on two levels joined by access routes to two open spaces, the former parade ground and the prison yard. Although surrounded by al fresco dining, cafes and bars punctuated by art installations made from the materials of the prison itself, prompting visitors to praise Tai Kwun as an oasis in the city center, the two large expanses of concrete maintain the original feel of utility and regulation. Exhibition and ‘edutainment’ spaces are set aside in the Central Police Station, the Barrack Block, Central Magistracy and Victoria Prison,



detailing historical timelines, displaying artefacts and educational material. Preserved areas across all buildings such as the courtroom, holding cells, morgue, and other interior spaces are accompanied by “Tai Kwun Tales” or “Hidden Stories” that give information about legends, quirky facts, conservation details, and historical notes. Free performances, talks, workshops, and film showings are held regularly, often at the “Laundry Steps”, a semi-outdoor theater on the site of the former Ablutions building, under the JC Cube auditorium. Guided heritage tours in English and Cantonese are offered daily and self-guided walks are encouraged, so that depending on whether one visits the former armory, magistracy or jail block, a visitor’s adopted vicarious identity may shift radically from government official to prosecuted criminal to the privileged position of the tourist class.

Tai Kwun’s spatiality continues to link the “Victorian” with properties of exclusion and power asymmetry: the complex remains exclusive rather than inclusive, because its status as an urban arts hub means that the grounds are primarily used by the well-to-do such as expat businessmen, workers from Central who rest or eat lunch in the few seats and shade available, and tourists. One visitor from Australia commented that “Once the old police headquarters, it has been transformed into an ex-pat heaven for afternoon drinks. It does have the slight smell of British Colonialism, I did expect to see people dressed completely in khaki, but thankfully times have changed” (Wongstays 2019). While “times have changed”, the Victorian setting nonetheless evokes memories of colonialism linked to whiteness and class. Many visitors leave comments remarking on the number of “non-Chinese” (SL Y 2019) patrons and the “mostly expat crowd” (Vagabondshoes 2019) frequenting restaurants, with “not within my budget” (RossOntario 2018) being a recurring phrase. Retail and restaurant spaces are high-end, matching the East/West heritage feel of the site, but discourage casual dining and reinforce economic segregation to the detriment of cultural diversity. Tai Kwun’s heterotopic power lies in increasing the capitalist logic of retail, entertainment, and heritage as binding social forces: one reviewer on Tripadvisor compared his visit to “a refurbished Disney experience” (SL Y 2019). The sanitized penal and legal heritage that Tai Kwun produces evokes little nostalgia or affective practices on behalf of most visitors. Similarly, its sterility as a carceral heritage site illustrates Tai Kwun’s success in neutralizing affect, so that it emerges as a support system for an already hegemonic power structure and cements the association of the nineteenth century in Hong Kong with punishment and crime within the city’s cultural memory. In 2019, the CPS revitalization project was recognized by UNESCO with an Award of Excellence in the Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation. From a heritage space, which celebrates a historical “one-stop shop” penal system as a particular vision of order that underpins Hong Kong’s much vaunted “rule of law”, to the cultural agenda of promoting Hong Kong as a modern cultural and artistic hub worthy of its “World City” agenda, Tai Kwun amply demonstrates how “the Victorian” can be harnessed to political aims.

#### 4. Tai Kwun as Heterotopia

Each iteration of the complex from the 1840s onwards rewrote the spatial organization of the site while reinforcing the architectural and colonial narratives of law and order in colonial Hong Kong. As a whole, Tai Kwun encapsulates almost all of Foucault’s six principles of heterotopia as outlined in his essay “On Other Spaces” (1967). As a former prison, CPS functions as a “heterotopia of deviation” (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 25); however, as carceral spaces began to be pushed out of the urban environment to locations of even more separation and isolation such as Hong Kong’s outlying islands, the history of the CPS compound illustrated a change in the centrality and spectacle of punishment in the metropolis, even while strategies of surveillance and control, such as CCTV and smart lamp posts, became part of the perceived carceral fabric of daily life. Tai Kwun brings together the supposedly incompatible spaces of the prison and the museum, and its heterochronic nature can be celebrated in its neo-Victorian adaptive reuse: while heritage involves the freezing of time, the temporal nature of Tai Kwun’s art exhibitions and events are “fleeting [and] transitory” in the same manner as festivals (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 26). As privatized

public space, Tai Kwun has regular hours of entry and, as a museum space, requires “certain gestures” (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 26) and rites from its visitors, while at the same time creating a juxtaposition against the previous constraint of mobility that the prison site offered. As well as this, as a former colonial site, Tai Kwun holds memories of when it functioned as a “heterotopia of compensation” (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 27) as colonial administrators hoped to enact a plan of law and order, “perfect[ . . . ]meticulous and well-arranged” in a colonial space to compensate for the “messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 27) space at the imperial center. Finally, as a prison museum, Tai Kwun emerges as a “space of illusion” (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 27) that reveals Hong Kong, especially during anti-extradition law protests, to be a “carceral city”, defined by Edward Soja in the context of Los Angeles, as a place where “*police* has become an insistent substitute for *polis*” (Soja 1996, p. 448). Tai Kwun also fits into the geography of regulation that has come to dominate Hong Kong’s political landscape; the geography of the “Big Station” has extended throughout the city and governance of public space, othering the street as a space for protest and carnivalesque disorder.

Simply applying Foucault’s concepts to Tai Kwun demonstrates its richness as a heterotopic site but misses an opportunity to critique the tendency to define heterotopia as only a place of otherness or as a subversive space. For example, another nearby neo-Victorian site, Graham Street Market, one of oldest operating “wet” markets in Hong Kong that sells fresh produce and meat, and is about to be demolished for gentrification, functions more like a transgressive heterotopia. The market’s local character, disruptive chaos, and exposure of the pre-packaged nature of food processing certainly de-zones the artificial context and imposed logic of Tai Kwun’s heterotopic potential. The careful manufacturing of neo-Victorian spaces such as Tai Kwun demands a more comprehensive study of heterotopic spatiality, focused on how heterotopias are manufactured as real spatial incongruities that expose space-making agendas of normalcy and dominance. Instead of transgressive freedom, Tai Kwun suggests that neo-Victorian heterotopias offer *alternate*, rather than *alternative*, ways of managing normative disciplining.

To expand on this idea, I draw on the work of Peter Johnson and others (cf. Hetherington 1997; Palladino and Miller 2016; Rankin and Collins 2017) who interpret Foucault’s notoriously “sketchy, open-ended and ambiguous” (Johnson 2013, p. 790) definition of heterotopia as a system of disrupting and organizing space that is emergent, contingent, and embedded rather than a closed or static space that designates difference. While heterotopias “mirror” (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 24) reality and thus provide other ways of conceiving of a spatial field, the concept of “other spaces” has been almost universally been deemed transgressive. A more nuanced understanding of heterotopia, Johnson argues, lies in resisting heterotopia being “tied to a space that promotes any promise, any hope, or any primary form of resistance and liberation” (Johnson 2006, p. 84). In urban, “post-civil” (Dehaene and De Cauter 2008, p. 4), neo-liberal capitalist societies like Hong Kong, where traditional divisions of space, such as clear boundaries between the public and private, have broken down, heterotopia can help explore how remaining spaces of otherness are ordered and compromised. In my reading, Tai Kwun assembles various agents, actors, and architectural designs to form a heterotopic device that produces new social and spatial demarcations. As a unique combination of heritage, museum, art gallery, commercial, and public space with multiple investors and users, Tai Kwun implicitly asks who such reorderings of space work for and why. Shot through with the interplay of power relations and positions, Tai Kwun functions as part of what Tom Bristow has called “late capitalist power geometry” (Bristow 2015, p. 47) and reveals how, under the conditions of commodification and globalization, heterotopias shift into homogeneity, where difference and meaningful connections to others disappear or become difficult to experience.

## 5. Entangling Heterotopias, Entangling the Gaze

My spatial analysis of Tai Kwun is based on multiple field visits, both following the map for the self-guided tour and participating in a guided tour. I took note of how,

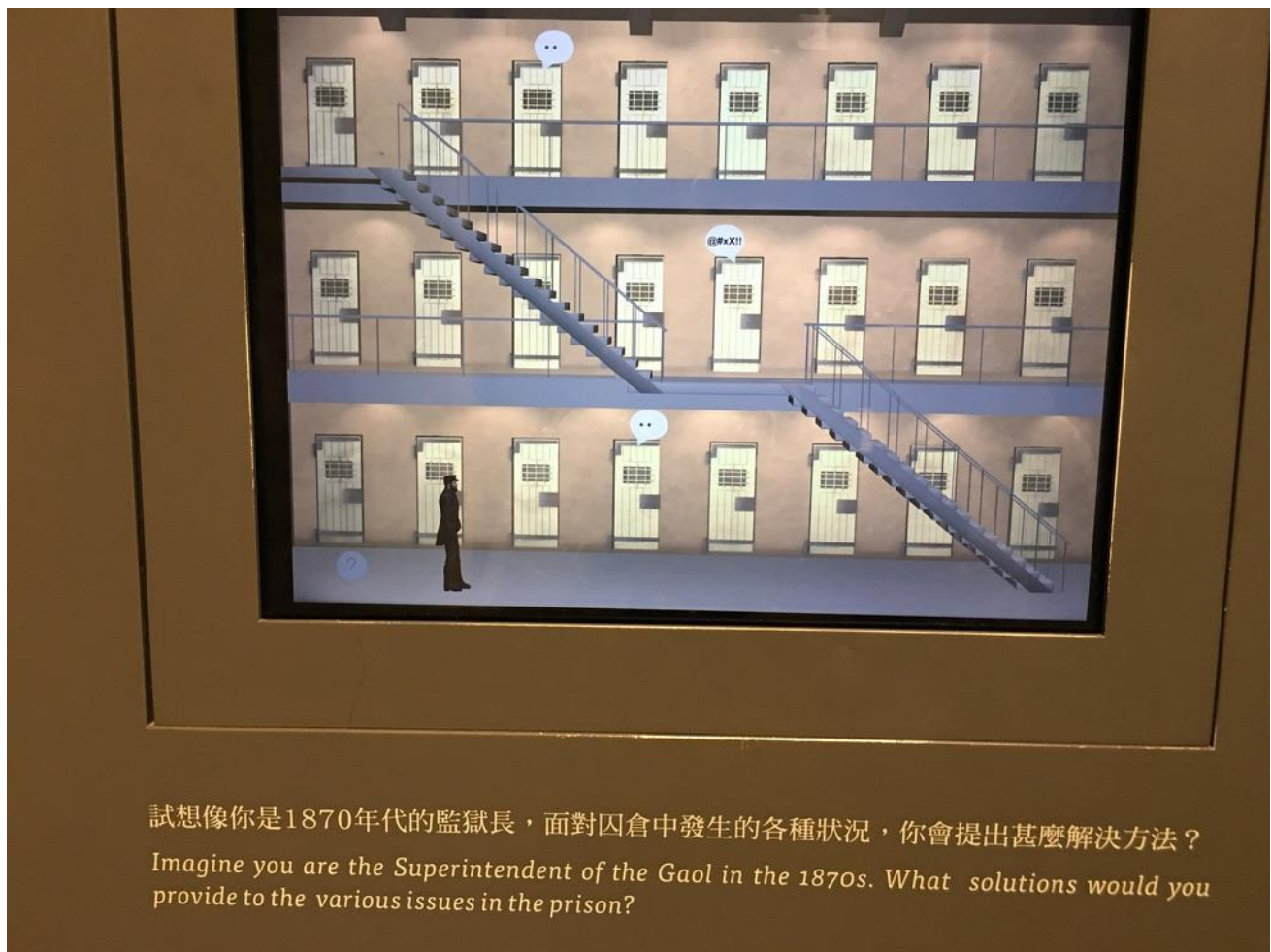
as a visitor, my gaze was directed and controlled by the arrangement of exhibits and the careful blending of historical and artistic artefacts as “edutainment”. Jennifer Turner describes carceral edutainment as a dissonant parallel between spaces and their uses: the “repackaging of the prison space into a luxury commodity significantly lightens the ‘dark’ aspect of dark tourism, through the spectacularisation or santisation (as appropriate for each venue) stretching a boundary” (Turner 2016, p. 127). At Tai Kwun, the exhibits depicting penal history are simplistically but effectively divided into edutainment experiences of the police and guards versus those of the prisoners, or between order and the (im-)possibility of freedom. But, perhaps the most illustrative of this “stretching” of boundaries is Tai Kwun’s signature bar, “Behind Bars”, where one can indulge in cocktails in a “series of former interlinked jail cells within E-Hall, [ . . . ] both literally and figuratively a space to connect with others” (Behind Bars 2021). Via the site’s entangling of heterotopic spaces such as the prison and the museum (CPS and JC Contemporary), the visitor’s gaze is also entangled by attempts to circumvent transgression in favor of sanitization. This entanglement enhances the ambiguity of heterotopian space but often by stripping it of the potential to disrupt the power system it is related to and hence occlude, rather than expose, the status quo produced via spatial dominance.

Although Tai Kwun’s exhibits are divided spatially so that the Police Headquarters, the Central Magistracy, and Victoria Prison each have their own historical gallery space, Tai Kwun’s main narrative, in my experience, juxtaposes prisoners’ experiences against those of agents of the state (the police officers, wardens, and other prison workers), thus highlighting the unequal positions of both groups and their representation within a shared space of isolation and exception. In the Police Headquarters, murals are painted on the walls depicting police officers waiting for their promotion interviews and maps of the constable’s beat in the area over time. Visitors are invited to see if they would “meet these past era’s requirements” (Tai Kwun 2019) to enroll as police officers: height, fitness goals and eyesight tests for men and women are placed on the wall for visitors to try out. In the halls of Victoria Prison, visitors can enter designated prison cells and learn about the daily life of prisoners. Silhouettes of prisoners are projected along the back walls of former prison cells depicting faceless, anonymous, male shadows participating in a range of activities from composing letters, meeting with family members, and even prison escape [see Figure 2]. Compared to the videos, interviews and anecdotes from former guards and retired officers, personal prisoner stories are missing, relegated to a few instances of preserved, often untranslated, Chinese and Vietnamese graffiti on the cell walls in detention blocks. While the shadowy figures seem designed to bridge the gap between visitor and prisoner, past and present, the distancing effect of the shadow also does not reveal the extent of the precarity of the prisoners’ position as outside of civil society. In the prison cell tableau describing infamous prison escapes, an interactive panel allows visitors to play a game to find escapees and alert prison authorities. Euphemistically described as “challenging prison security” (Tai Kwun 2019), there exists no narrative as to why these prisoners might have attempted escape, an elaboration of their crime, or the conditions under which they were held [see Figure 3]. These examples illustrate the multiple positioning of visitors as spectators, state employees, and prisoners but also reveal how the simulacrum of the prison’s past provides physical and imaginative access to become a police officer while preventing visitors from envisaging prisoners as fully-fledged individuals rather than merely as “participants in unlawful activities for which they should be punished” (Turner 2016, p. 108).





**Figure 2.** Silhouettes of prisoners projected onto walls of prison cells. Image author's own.



**Figure 3.** Interactive panel: roleplay as the British Superintendent to punish prisoners. Image author's own.

Even where visitors are encouraged to “walk in the footsteps of the convicted” (Tai Kwun 2019), such as in F Hall, the former Prisoners Admission Building, the line between voyeur and participant is never really crossed. This is one of the few locations where the visitor is hailed in the present as a prisoner: plaques declare that “you are now going to be searched” and “your prisoner number is your identity” (Tai Kwun 2019). In one interactive area, standing on a line painted on the ground activates an exhibit illuminating the daily necessities that prisoners would receive prior to entering their cells and a replica of a shower stall for “body check” (Tai Kwun 2019). Once you have “toed the line”, so to speak, and “followed the rules” (Tai Kwun 2019) of admission, you are “allowed” to take a mugshot as a souvenir photograph [see Figure 4]. While the intent of the exhibit is, to some extent, to show how the prisoner is dehumanized, especially in the nineteenth century and the 1970s when racial tensions in Hong Kong were pronounced, the visitor's experience exemplifies what Allie Terry, in the context of the Bargello in Florence, has called “civic cleansing”, where the manipulation of sight serves to “cleanse” or redeem both the prison and the “populace” who pass through the museum (Terry 2010, p. 852). By encountering the “duality of beautiful form and violent context” (Terry 2010, p. 852), visitors can glimpse the connections “between the historical institutional control of the criminal body and the new cultural agenda of the museum as a representation of the nation” (Terry 2010, p. 849). Underscored by the shower stall in the Tai Kwun Admissions exhibit, museum visitors actively perform the same procedures as criminals that enfold them into the body of the state.





**Figure 4.** Visitors becoming prisoners in the former Prisoners Admission Building. Image author's own.

A more complex positionality to manipulate and “train” the visitor’s gaze within heterotopic space can be seen in the gallery for “The Story of Central Police Station” where one can view the history of “Central Police Station Through Time” as per a frieze along the perimeter of the room. In the middle of the room, three exhibits document the insignia of police summer uniforms from the 1970s. Here, visitors are introduced to the position of a “hau sang” (Tai Kwun 2019), a term for a young boy hired to help with minor chores around the police station. “Hau sang” has just brought the different uniforms and accoutrements to the station, and viewers are invited to learn about the significance of badges, belts, and insignia as related to rank. Perhaps to complement the diminutive position of the “hau sang”, miniature dioramas of the prison barber, doctor’s office, officers’ mess, and the report room and its adjacent holding cells are displayed under glass. Fictionalizing rather than representing the past, one of the pedagogical effects of miniatures is to “reinforce normative social behaviours through active interaction, especially with children” (Davy and Dixon 2019, p. 9). Furthermore, miniatures can “manipulate their audience into supporting a violent or prejudicial social phenomena by making it appear harmless and mundane” (Davy and Dixon 2019, p. 9). A medium commonly used by adults, the miniature is deployed to educate children in “socially useful forms of interaction” (Davy and Dixon 2019, p. 9). In the “Hau sang” display, the miniature produces a specific kind of gaze that redefines heterotopia’s transgressive potential as viewers are positioned in ways that reinforce rather than destabilize the status quo. The plaque for the Report Room diorama, for instance, states that “the Duty Officer’s desk was raised to eye level for a person of average height to underline the officer’s authority” (Tai Kwun), but the small scale and simplified representation empties the space of its authority [see Figure 5]. This miniaturized reproduction also infantilizes the viewer who, while mimicking the raised position of the Duty Officer over the display, is nonetheless positioned as a child, learning that punishment and power might be “socially useful forms of interaction” (Davy and Dixon 2019, p. 9). The reduction of no longer existing spaces to toys or art object throws into sharp relief the equally “miniature” size of the prison cells I describe below.

Tai Kwun’s prison cell exhibits beg the questions: what is the penal gaze? On what should viewers focus? In the prison cell exhibits, daily life is scripted as mundane while the history surrounding it is punctuated with violence and volatility. Food and bodily functions fit the narrative of sanitization and hygiene and cater to the gratuitous side of “dark tourism”: the prison provides multiple opportunities to view and photograph the squat toilet and holes for solid waste as well as buckets for night soil allotted to prisoners. The viewer may be guided to consider hygiene, but issues of privacy and the humiliation of performing bodily functions in public are merely implied [see Figure 6]. In the cells, the emphasis lies on a series of displays of prisoner life in the nineteenth century; specifically, Chinese and Western prisoners’ dietary needs were catalogued extensively and highlighted cultural differences and attitudes towards nutrition. Racial prejudices are also addressed in the display: Indian and Chinese food portions were reduced in 1878, because colonial administrators believed that life on the “inside” (PMT 2008, p. 73) was too indulgent, encouraging local prisoners to reoffend. Replicas of daily food items, such as rice, bread, fruit, and fish, are on display as well as examples of special diets for illness and holidays. A similar display of different meals available to officers of different ethnicities (curry for Indian officers, dumplings for Waihaiwei officers, chicken and rice for local employees, and French fries and a fried cutlet for Europeans) can be viewed in the Central Police Station. The overall narrative is one of progressive reform as the colonial system responded to developments in nutritional science and the needs of prisoners, in particular those engaged in heavy labor. Food, however, was also used as nutritional punishment: in one cell which is “locked” to visitors, a single column is spotlighted in the middle of the cell upon which sits a bowl of rice [see Figure 7]. In the late-nineteenth century, prisoners who violated prison rules were limited to one bowl of rice and one glass of water per day—the so-called “water rice” punishment. This transformation of a fake bowl of rice into an object worthy of exhibit continues the prison museum’s curious circumvention of heterotopia’s heightened



ability to reveal. By removing food from one system of classification (the carceral) and placing it into another (aesthetics), heterotopic dissonance is created which blurs, rather than makes clear, the boundaries between suffering and succor.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 5.** Miniature diorama of the Report Room. Image author's own.



**Figure 6.** Prison hygiene and the lack of privacy on display. Image author's own.



**Figure 7.** A bowl of rice on display to illustrate “water rice” diet as punishment. Image author’s own.

Like prisoners, visitors’ bodies are also cultivated or “fashioned” to enhance an aesthetic experience through engagement with spaces of incarceration and violence aestheticized by the estrangement of objects into art or decoration. Such objects as the bowl of rice

or the nineteenth-century handcuffs that sit in their own glass case “symbolize the series of events from arrest to imprisonment” (Tai Kwun 2019) but not the realities of punishment. These exhibits redirect the viewer from empathy, or “what it feels like” to receive and consume a sparse prison meal, to being physically and emotionally distanced from the subject of punishment. At such a distance, Michelle Brown suggests, “interrogation of punishment rarely materializes in the everyday life of the spectator. Rather, punishment circulates as a cultural distraction or social oddity” (Brown 2009, p. 193). Visitors are thus encouraged to downplay or even erase the role of colonial punishment in the city. For example, after passing through the “Main Heritage Gallery” in the Barrack Block, the visitor is directed into the former Armoury Room [sic] which chronicles “Operation Central”, providing a brief history of the “responsibilities and the major emergencies handled over the years” (Tai Kwun 2019). Not surprisingly, the timeline covers events such as natural disasters, the Japanese occupation, and the 1967 riots, but stops short of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Jarring to visitors in 2019, in the context of anti-Extradition and anti-government protests that escalated into almost weekly violence, glass cases also showcase the development of anti-riot weaponry, shields, and uniforms, and a plaque from the 1967 riots reminds officers that “brains better [sic] than bullets and brute force” (Tai Kwun 2019) [see Figure 8]. Amongst rampant accusations of police brutality against protesters dominating the news, “brute force” is erased by the aestheticization of carceral space. Tai Kwun’s first anniversary coincided with the 175th anniversary of the Hong Kong Police Force, and a large-scale exhibition, “Tai Kwun: 101”, marked the occasion, replete with simulation scenes of immigration proceedings, replicas of cells and visiting areas in primary colors, with prohibitory signs displayed out of context as collages. Beautifully presented and curated by the creative team, One Bite Design, objects were not recalibrated to “mimic an old scenario, but in an abstract and re-interpreted journey that encourages communications and encounters” (Onebite Design 2019). In the context of the site’s carceral history, however, the goal to “abstract and reinterpret” suggests that in this neo-Victorian heterotopia the spectatorial gaze would be reformed to see art and not punishment.

This same gaze might be carried from the prison museum through to JC Contemporary as the heterotopic system that regulates the gaze and reinforces the specific relationships of power between visitor and objects on display moves transversally between spaces. The prison museum forms a violent frame as it architecturally enfolds the art in JC Contemporary. On its own, JC Contemporary would also function as a heterotopia, a heterochronic space, “indefinitely accumulating time” (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 26) or, as a gallery space of rotating collections and exhibitions, mimicking the “festival” or “fairground” (Foucault [1967] 1986, p. 26), which certainly captures the atmosphere of the recent Takashi Murakami extravaganza held to celebrate Tai Kwun’s one-year anniversary. Encircled by Tai Kwun’s grounds, the experience of visiting JC Contemporary articulates even more clearly Tony Bennett’s influential argument that the prison and the museum share similar qualities:

the functioning of museums as civic institutions has operated through specific regimes of vision which, informing both the manner in which things are arranged to be seen and the broader visual environment conditioning practices of looking, give rise to particular forms of ‘civic seeing’ in which the civic lessons embodied in those arrangements are to be seen, understood, and performed by the museum’s visitors. (Bennett 2006, p. 121)

The scopic regime of the prison museum conditions the viewer’s gaze, tempering encounters with otherness that JC Contemporary, at least visually, offers. The content of JC Contemporary’s exhibits reflects some of the most innovative and exciting contemporary art. From its inaugural exhibition, “Dismantling the Scaffold” to “The Violence of Gender” to the work of Chinese artist, Cao Fei, and “Murakami vs. Murakami”, JC Contemporary offers a riot of visual narratives and perspectives. However, the contemporary art space’s entanglement with the carceral context of Tai Kwun significantly weakens, if not threatens, its heterotopic potential as a place of creativity and space to think through the status of



innovation and creative freedom in the city, with the cultural agenda of CPS dominating visitors' ways of seeing.



**Figure 8.** Problematizing force: a plaque from the 1967 riots. Image author's own.

The partnership between Tai Kwun and JC Contemporary suggests larger tensions in heterotopic geography between carceral space and its encroachment on alternatives to dominant ways of seeing, acting, or ordering. Not long after its opening, Tai Kwun was embroiled in a self-censorship debacle involving author-in-exile, Ma Jian, considered a dissident by Chinese authorities. The Hong Kong Literary International Festival rented Tai Kwun facilities to host its 2018 series, and organizers invited Ma to read from and speak about his controversial novel, *China Dream* (2018), a critique of modern China and a satirical jab at Xi Jinping's vision of the great Chinese Dream of the nation's rejuvenation. Following on the heels of the expulsion from Hong Kong of the *Financial Times* editor and journalist, Victor Mallet, for hosting a talk by the leader of a banned pro-independence party at the Foreign Correspondents Club, the sudden cancellation of Ma's events was seen as an act of overly cautious self-censorship. Tai Kwun's director, Timothy Calnin, justified the cancellation by saying that "we do not want Tai Kwun to become a platform to promote the political interests of any individual" (Grundy 2018). After Ma insisted that he intended to speak at the Festival as a novelist and not an activist, and after local artists staged protest performances on Tai Kwun's grounds, Calnin, under pressure also from donors, re-invited Ma to attend. Although not specifically related to the status of contemporary art at Tai Kwun, the Ma Jian incident provoked criticism and concern across the political and cultural spectrum, with one lawmaker stating, "The Ma Jian incident has rubbed the veneer of success off the Tai Kwun project and opened people's eyes to the failures: The new prison it has become . . . expensive restaurants around the yards . . ." (Batten 2018, ellipses in original). The "new prison", the quote suggests, links commercialism with censorship, but it also implies the expansion of the carceral gaze—reading practices, in this case—to affect activities within this heterotopic space. Entangled in CPS, JC Contemporary becomes an apt metaphor for the problems faced by the art community and market in Hong Kong and their ability to withstand censorship and self-censorship: in the same manner as Tai Kwun's aestheticization and popularization of Victorian punishment, art risks becoming a means to enforce the smooth continuation of hegemonic power relations.

## 6. The Landscape of Neo-Victorian Heterotopia

Tai Kwun digresses from heterotopia's common conception as a transgressive space for otherness, such as the prison in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*. Even with the appendage of JC Contemporary, Tai Kwun supports rather than disrupts the hegemonic systems to which it is related; however, the site as a whole encourages us to think about neo-Victorian spatiality as the interplay between panoptic spaces of control and marginal spaces of transgressive freedom. It may prove instructive to rethink heterotopian spaces in terms of networks: linking Tai Kwun to neo-Victorian sites across Hong Kong might disclose larger patterns of inclusion/exclusion, uniformity/difference, order/disorder operating across the city and affecting the management of public space.<sup>5</sup> Almost all heritage sites across Hong Kong are remnants of the Victorian colonial infrastructure, and adaptive reuse has transformed sites such as Heritage: 1881, Murray House, and Flagstaff House into retail or museum sites that affect their heterotopic contributions. At first glance, similar to Tai Kwun, the network of neo-Victorian heritage sites across Hong Kong reflects an official ideology of how to manage rather than support alterity. More conventional neo-Victorian heterotopic sites unsettle and present alternative spatial and social relations, such as Graham Street Market and Victoria Park, the latter the starting point of most protest marches in Hong Kong that occur under the watchful eye of a statue of Queen Victoria, but these have gradually become victims to gentrification and urban renewal or have been regulated and repurposed in such a way that citizens' ability to produce otherness through their own elected use practices has been curtailed. Neo-Victorian heterotopias contribute to the variety of public spaces in the city as modes to think through the continued reliance on colonial order and its reproduction of asymmetrical relations of power in the name of heritage. A map of neo-Victorian heterotopology in Hong Kong reveals how the ability of heterotopias to provide countersites of resistance or spaces for counter-publics to congregate are being

increasingly “Victorianized”, subjugated to the most superficial reading of “the Victorian” as repressive and hegemonic. In a constantly shifting political landscape, it remains to be seen if and how neo-Victorian sites adapt as the preservation of the colonial past gives way to greater and greater forms of authoritarianism.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Adaptive reuse commonly refers to the modification of a heritage building for public access and for uses beyond which it was originally intended. A significant change in the economic value of the site, it is hoped, can conserve aesthetic and historical structures and elements.
- <sup>2</sup> All quotations cited under “Tai Kwun” come from the site’s informational plaques and signage.
- <sup>3</sup> The three-tiered grading system for heritage preservation in Hong Kong, which falls under the auspices of the Antiquities and Monuments Office, protects only buildings and relics rather than entire sites, land or environmental context. Only buildings existing before 1800 are automatically declared Grade 1 monuments, while others are judged on a case-by-case basis with no timeline for decisions to be made. Buildings declared Grade 2 or 3 are not protected from demolition, especially if privately-owned. Critics of the AMO’s ability to handle heritage preservation cite lack of legal reinforcement for preservation, insufficient resources for compensation and education, and the lack of coordination across multiple departments.
- <sup>4</sup> In 2019 when I visited Tai Kwun, a temporary exhibition, “Let’s Do Lunch!” featuring the diversity of Central’s lunch culture, was ongoing. Whimsical and educational, the curators hoped that “everyone would slow down, and be more aware of the quality of their lunch after visiting the exhibition” (Tai Kwun 2019). This was the only explicit direction to viewers to “be more aware” of their surroundings.
- <sup>5</sup> Related to this project would also be a study of global neo-Victorian carceral heritage sites from Reading Gaol in England to Old Melbourne Gaol in Australia, from Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia to Devil’s Island in French Guiana. Such a study might illuminate different understandings and the interconnectivity of (carceral) heterotopias in a global context.

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