

## What is that Star? Media cultural action in the claiming of space

Lam Oi Wan

Let me begin with a story on a local social movement campaign. It is about the preservation of Star Ferry Pier and Queen's Pier at Central, the heart of the City.

### Twinkle twinkle little stars

Here are some historical facts about the two Piers:

The Star Ferry is a passenger ferry service operator in Hong Kong. Its principal routes carry passengers across Victoria Harbour, between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. The company has been operating since the late 1880s. It was founded by Parsee Dorabjee Nowrojee as the Kowloon Ferry Company in 1888 and renamed Star Ferry in 1898. The name was inspired by his love of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Crossing the Bar", whose first line was *Sunset and evening star, and one clear call for me!*

As for the Queen's Pier, apart from being a public pier it had been a place for the colonial governor's inauguration and departure during the British colonial period. In 1975, when Queen Elizabeth II visited Hong Kong, she anchored at the Queen's Pier. In 1997 when Patten, the last governor, left he also departed from this pier.

The demolition of the two piers was ordered under the land reclamation plan proposed in 1999 for a new highway, a new shopping district and a seaside park. Although the land reclamation plan had gone through public consultation, the public were unaware of the proposed demolition of the two piers. Even professional architects had expressed their opposition; some had put forward alternative plans for preservation but were ignored by the Government.

Since August 2006, a group of public art students (from the Youth Center) started to do performances and installations outside the Star Ferry Pier in Central to express their concerns about the demolition of the pier. The meanings of their works were very diverse: some expressed a sense of loss; some showed the disappearance of Star as a losing of direction; some represented the pier as social history; some were nostalgic; some were in a mourning mood and some showed their anger. Actually, passers-by didn't understand exactly

what they were doing; and everyone had their own reading of the artwork / performance. However, the mainstream media in general represented their work as being in a nostalgic mood.



Artists' performance and exhibition at Star Ferry. Photographs courtesy Choi Tze Kwan.



Artists' performance and exhibition at Star Ferry.  
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Choi Tsz-kwan, Ger and Tsang Tak-ping were facilitators of the public art workshop. Their work in Star Ferry Pier was meant to be an experiment, a course which brought what the students learned in the classroom into a real public space. The effect of their public performance and exhibitions was tremendous in terms of consciousness raising among the students (as they had to think about their relation with the space). It also generated some public awareness / wonderings / feelings as to the meaning of Star Pier in relation to Hong Kong. Such sentiment was politicized later into a citizen campaign through the involvement of media activists.

### To claim or not to claim, that's the question

*We can say that the artists are the first group of citizens in Hong Kong to claim the space in the Star Ferry by inscribing their feelings about and interpretations of the Pier and Clock Tower onto the disappearing space. However, their claims could not prevent the space from disappearing.*

Instead of preserving the actual pier, the government constructed a Disney-style new pier which mimics the Western style old pier of the early nineteenth century, and claimed that the government had preserved Hong Kong people's collective memories: they had scanned and saved the old Star Ferry pier with three dimensional digital techniques into virtual computer files! The government emphasized that the reclamation and road construction plan had been approved since 1999.

There were bits and pieces of reports and commentaries about the demolition of Star Ferry Pier since June 2006 at [inmediahk.net](http://inmediahk.net).<sup>01</sup> The first commentary was written by Leung Po, an artist and a core editorial member of [inmediahk.net](http://inmediahk.net); the article complained about the malady of the city: an independent intellectual bookstore had closed down and Star Ferry Pier was to be demolished.

By the end of November, the demolition had started. The government expressed its "condolences" regarding the historical building but insisted that the development still needed to carry on. From December onward, there were several calls for public participation to protest the demolition: December 3rd, a rally to Government offices; December 5th, a human chain outside the construction site.

Hoidick, another core member of [inmediahk.net](http://inmediahk.net), published a critical report on the December 5th action expressing doubts on the nostalgic mood and "photo-shooting" gestures of protest. It stirred

up some very important discussion among the activists. A major organizer of the public arts performance, Ger, said:

At this stage, I think we should stop executing our wrong representation towards the Star Ferry action, stop this action that makes the people feel annoyed, stop the funeral, stop the ceremony.....otherwise, we will lose the support of the public in future struggles concerning the city.

Our action actually focuses on the city's planning, a fight for our participation in the city in the cultural and historical context, not simply as common memory, not as mere personal emotions. It is because all those common memories and emotions are not convincing enough to ask for the support from the public. Memory and nostalgia don't mean a thing in Hong Kong. Our aims are actually far more important and meaningful than this.

The representation of our action as a mourning ceremony is totally wrong. Coz once you finished the funeral, the "thing" must die! In these last couple of days I was thinking about the reason people do not support us. I found that when the public finished all that ceremony (taking photos, tears, travel with the last ship....etc.), they wouldn't keep it alive in order to make their ceremony reasonable! They would just give it up.

That's how people treat the sort of memory that we are emphasizing in this action. Of course, the mass media are responsible at this point too. Coz they reported the whole thing as a good memory that we have to keep (something easily solved by taking a photo and scanning it). From the very first, we failed to keep the emphasis on our concerns for the city, to keep our own aim. We have lost already.

Another artist, Yeung Yang, who participated in the December 5th action, wrote:

Organized social action / movement (not that I know too much / have much experience of that) must be viewed in relation / tension / contradiction with personal transformation. A person is always in public, and what one does, can do, will actually be done in public, related to her/his personal transformative power. Everyone has his/her own rhythm for achieving that, and allowing it to happen throughout their whole life time. No one can be, should be, forced, because this itself is the most inhumane thing to do.

I don't know what it takes to have an 'organized' front based on degrees of solidarity. I can only see that we are more critical—but perhaps not to the point where we understand how our bodies relate to social space, and can respond to it revealingly. My hunch is that activism requires that.

There is a lot to learn.

On December 11th Hoidick picked up breaking news (released by a citizens' group) about the Secretary for Home Affairs' lie on the legislative council about a consultation report that the demolition had been supported by the Antiquities and Monuments consultation committee in 1999. The fact was quite the reverse.

On December 12th there was another call (posted in the commentary of Hoidick's report) for a human chain action. The action turned into an occupation of the construction site by a few activists (many are citizen reporters in *inmediahk.net*) for thirty-six hours, and a series of spontaneous actions, such as a sit-in protest outside a key government official's home late at night, etc. The campaign had developed into a small political crisis. The activists' demand was simple, stop demolition, which the government perceived as a challenge to the administrative body's governing power. Instead of suspending the construction, the government speeded up the construction and cut the Clock Tower (the symbol of the pier) into half on December 16th. Activists reacted with a forty-nine hour hunger strike and the protest activities moved to Queen's Pier

In December there were more than a hundred reports, commentaries and announcements regarding the two piers at *inmediahk.net*. The discussions covered movement strategies, discourses, reports, personal reflections, debates, etc.

### Media activism and cultural activism

The government, mainstream media, politicians, and even organizers and activists who have been involved since July 2006, didn't know what exactly had happened: why would a fading subject be revived and develop this momentum all of a sudden?

Clichéd analysis said that it was the power of the internet network, as some participants explained that they went out to strike because of what they read in *inmediahk.net*. They called this post-modern flash mob aggregation. Some pointed out that a new activism has emerged which rejects the politics of public relations.

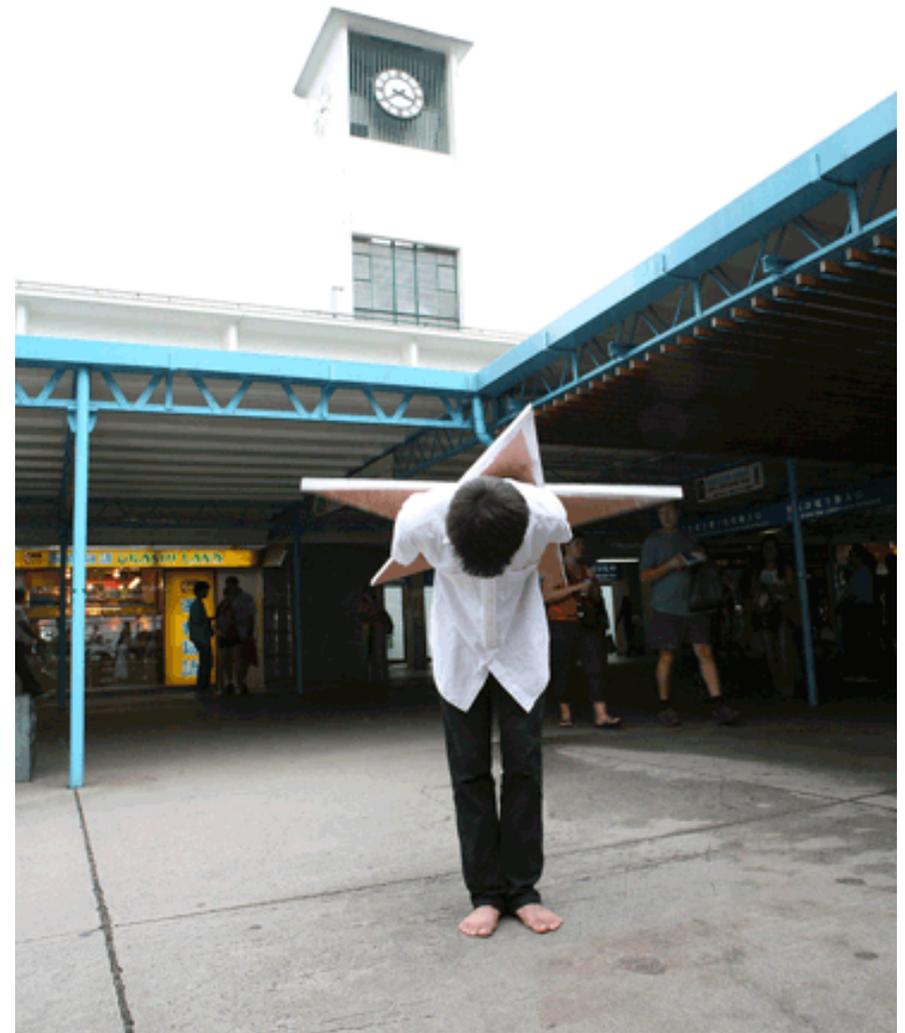
To some extent, the rejection of the politics of public relations is a valid description, as independent media's founding principle is to reject manipulation by the government, business and political parties. It fails to capture the delicate rationality of media activism, a belief that reporting is a transformative power for both the individual and the society. Through engaged / subjective / analytical / emotional writing and reporting, an individual makes his / her own claim for the event, and becomes part of an incident. In other words, the media activist believes in what s/he writes, takes responsibility and jumps into the story of his / her own construction. They are not writing for the past alone, but also for the future.

Since the anti-WTO demonstration in Hong Kong in December 2005, there have been some discussions, and tensions felt, about the balance between the writing of a story or script (reporting) and action. Quite often, when a media activist jumps into the story, s/he couldn't jump out and write the script. In the Star Ferry Pier campaign, it has been proven that script-writing is a most significant battlefield as the government has been very active in defining the campaign with its public relations machine. It tried to confuse the public with the concepts of "relocation" and "collective memories" to dilute the campaign's political significance.

Reviewing the process, in fact, the radicalization of the campaign can be seen to have started with Hoidick's few reports in early December, first questioning the representation of the campaign in a nostalgic mood, then redirecting the campaign to target the government officials and the decision-making process. Words / script generated from the event came before action. On the next day, participants were determined to stop the construction and supporters outside the construction site had a midnight hunt chasing after a major government official. The representation of the event (script), via action, pushes the flow / development of the event.

While media activists' reports are discursive representations, cultural activists' works are more symbolic. Meaning is generated from the artistic acts in interaction with the space. And the readings of the artwork are diverse. The diversity of meanings, feelings, symbolisms that the public arts created had been extremely successful in aggregating different people together: some participants joined in because of their memories, some wanted to protect the harbor, some determined to claim the space in the central district, some protested against the developmental thirst, etc. In evaluating the campaign, Tsang Tak-ping also said that the result was beyond his expectation. The public art project has radicalized the students. At first, the students were just doing what they wanted in that space. Once the connection was made, they started to ask, "What can I do to

save this space?" If there were a single and overarching script at the very beginning, I don't think people would come together for such a prolonged fight.



Artists' performance and exhibition at Star Ferry. Photograph courtesy Choi Tze Kwan.

The media activists' reports entered the scene later as an articulating power able to draw people with diverse interests together with a clearer agenda.

People are looking for connections. Arts and media are connecting devices. Both are making claim on space and interpretations of event. The former is at the symbolic level, the latter in the discursive field. How to bring together the forces of the art and media activists would be a most important and experimental agenda for the future.



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#### Endnote

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*Inmediahk.net* is an online platform found in 2004 by a diverse group of people in Hong Kong, including activists, artists, former journalists, academics and students. It promotes citizen journalism as a practice of participatory democracy. Up till now, the website has more than 3,000 registered users, 500 of whom are contributors. The website has approximately 4,000 plus visitors per day, and about 60,000 to 80,000 per month. About 80% of visitors come to the site every week. It is funded by Hong Kong In-Media which gives support to independent media movements, media research and education.

Hong Kong In-Media established another website, *interlocals.net*, in 2006. It is designed to bridge the information gap among local independent media in different places, especially non-English speaking countries, through translation in order to counter global news agencies' representation and mediation of non-Western locals.