

A river in the city: Chinese University architecture professor Wallace Chang's vision of what Kai Tak Nullah (pictured far left) in San Po Kong could look like one day if the government gets behind his plans to develop it into a proper river. Today, the nullah is already cleared up and even sees some fish and egrets (pictured, opposite page).

River of Life

A once foul and rancid-smelling nullah could be transformed into a haven for birds and nature lovers. It could even become a river.

Winnie Yeung reveals how.

It was a chain of simple coincidences which set about the miracle transformation of the Kai Tak Nullah from a stinky, dirty ditch into what now looks like a fresh and clean river. Not so long ago it was a concrete sewage channel running across Diamond Hill all the way down to San Po Kong and the old Kai Tak airport in Kowloon. It wasn't supposed to be this way—the nullah was originally designed to allow rainwater to flow back into the harbor to prevent flooding. But as industry and housing boomed in the 1960s and 70s, rainwater was joined by sewage and wastewater, turning the nullah black, disgusting and smelly.

Local residents hated it (although many were to blame for the pollution) and passersby walked at the speed of light to avoid the rancid stench. Many other nullahs in the city have been covered up and at one point this was suggested as a way of improving the living environment in San Po Kong.

But if you take a walk past the nullah today, or simply have a look at the pictures on this page, you will hardly believe your eyes. In dramatic contrast to its disgusting past, the nullah now looks clean, is far less smelly and there are even fish swimming around in the water. Residents no longer avoid the area and some actually wander down to the water's edge to have a look at what's beneath the surface. It's as if the residents of San Po Kong have suddenly gained a river from out of nowhere.

This didn't happen because of some government master plan,

like in the case of Seoul's Chonggyecheon River, an underground sewer that the Korean government resurfaced, cleaned and turned into a river as part of an ambitious attempt to go green. The Hong Kong government did nothing as bold as this. Everything happened because of a series of coincidences.

In the late 90s, the Drainage Services Department redirected the filtered wastewater from Sha Tin to the Kai Tak Nullah because the geography of the area made it difficult for the water to flow out to Tolo Harbor. This new source of water flowing into the Kai Tak Nullah diluted the original dirty water and completely transformed it. Within no time at all it was less stinky and the waters ran clear.

Now more than 20 species of fish can be found in the nullah and every evening, white egrets fly to this new unlikely fishing spot to catch their supper. All of a sudden there is a healthy ecosystem emerging from one of the filthiest spots in the city.

And this has given people ideas—what if the nullah becomes a river, or more specifically, what if it reclaims its status as the Long Jin River, which it was about 150 years ago (see box, opposite page)? One of these thinkers is former legislator Chan Yuen-han who recently retired from her political career having left Legco last year. Now she wants to spend more time focusing on projects like the Kai Tak Nullah development which she has spent more than a decade working on. Despite her commitment to the project, Chan has not always been a big fan of the nullah-cum-river—at first she

wanted to cement it. "The public opinion was leaning towards covering the nullah to widen the road back then," she remembers. "Sealing it seemed to be more feasible than any other option." But then another coincidence occurred. In 2005, after the government decided to seal the 16 nullahs in Hong Kong, it turned out that they didn't actually have a big enough budget that year. They delayed the project but nothing ever happened and this allowed Kai Tak Nullah to be revitalized into what we see today in San Po Kong.

"It's really a coincidence," she says. "If they went ahead with the project we wouldn't have the opportunity to think about developing the nullah today."

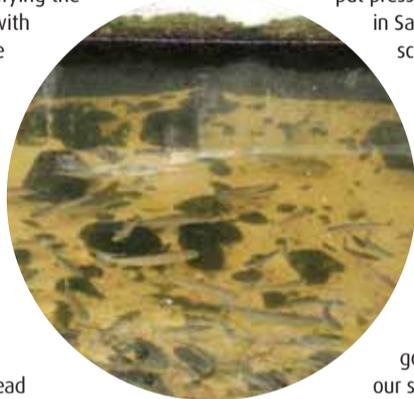
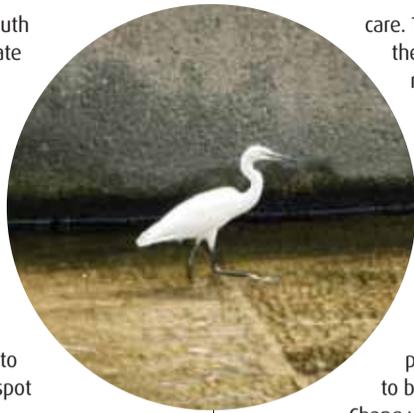
Chinese University architecture professor Wallace Chang, who has been lobbying the government to beautify Kai Tak Nullah with Chan since 2006, believes the development of Kai Tak Nullah will create the perfect opportunity to integrate this once-hated nullah back into the community.

Growing up in a public housing block next the nullah, Prof. Chang remembers how he and his friends always sneaked into the nullah to play, despite his parent's disapproval. "When the nullah was so hated by the community, it got detached from the whole area," he says. "But by nature, this is part of the district—it is a stream coming from Diamond Hill down to the waters, and it serves as a wind passageway along Choi Hung Road for the district."

Cutting across the district from north to south also makes the river the perfect tool to integrate the whole district, especially when the government has a grand plan to develop the south of the Kai Tak district. Prof. Chang thinks that if the government is going to develop the nullah as part of this new Kai Tak plan, they should not only integrate the old neighborhood of San Po Kong, but also rejuvenate it so it coexists harmoniously with new developments. One such successful story is the Chonggyecheon River, which not only brought a breath of fresh air into the concrete city of Seoul, but also became a spot where people could hang out.

"We are not talking about completely purifying the water in the Kai Tak nullah to make it a river with potable water," says Prof. Chang. "But imagine what a river in the middle of a district could achieve—green and water in the middle of a residential neighborhood. That's priceless." Several ideas are buzzing around including putting grass along the two riverbanks, or simply removing all the barriers and fences so the public can actually walk along the water. Once the riverfront is opened up and the water quality improved, the opportunity for development will be limitless.

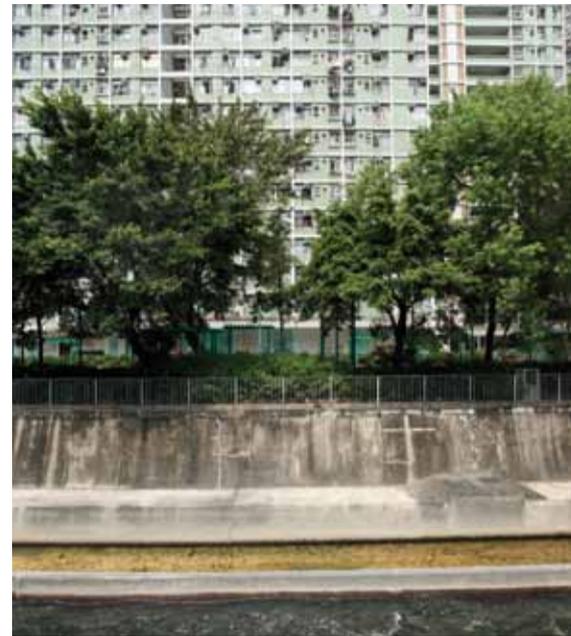
When Chan Yuen-han started to advocate for the development of the Kai Tak Nullah instead of cementing it, residents were upset. "They really hated me because they did not want to even see the nullah for another day. No one cared about the nullah then and they didn't see any reason to improve it," she remembers. "But today they actually



care. They are positive towards developing it and they even stop by to enjoy looking at the nullah now." Among them is 61-year-old Mr. Chan, who has been living in San Po Kong for more than 40 years with his family. He talks while he is watching a little white egret (pictured left) hunting for food in the nullah. "Yes, who would have thought the water would be clear now," he says while pointing at the egret. "A river would be nice."

However, even after years of persuasion, the government still seems unmoved by the proposals. Chan says: "The government needs to be braver and take action." Meanwhile, Prof. Chang wishes to use the power of the community to put pressure on the government. There are 23 schools in San Po Kong which are now developing a special school curriculum for students to study conservation, ecology and sociology in relation to the nullah. Five of them are actually located along the nullah. A festival called "GREEN—through the Kai Tak River" is currently taking place at the river and also at art gallery 1a space, with workshops, forums and exhibitions to promote public awareness. "Hong Kong people have no concept of rivers, especially a clean river running across an urban area," Prof. Chang says. "Kai Tak Nullah would be a good opportunity to bring this concept to our society." ■

"GREEN—through the Kai Tak River" runs until December 13. 1a space, Unit 14, Cattle Depot Artist Village, 63 Ma Tau Kok Rd., To Kwa Wan, 2529-0087. For more information, go to hk.myblog.yahoo.com/kaitakriver.



The History of the Kai Tak Nullah

It was originally the Long Jin River and dates back at least 150 years. It runs in front of many rural villages including the 600-year-old Nga Tsin Wai Village, which is the oldest existing village located in an urban area of Hong Kong. It will soon be demolished for redevelopment. During World War II, the Japanese army used stones from walls they tore down at the nearby walled city in Kowloon City to strengthen the two sides of the river. Those stones remain as part of the main wall of the nullah today.

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