Navigating and Reclaiming Agency: How Do the Sent-Down Youth Who Escaped from China to Hong Kong Understand Their Choices to Flee?

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Ph.D in American Studies

1.614 million people
fled from Canton to Hong Kong
(1951 -1980)

SENT-DOWN YOUTH 1968-1978

It refers to urban middle and high school students who were mobilized to rural China for labor-intensive agricultural work after their education was abruptly halted as part of the “Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside” campaign.

Source: Fenghuangwang

RED GUARDS

Source: Wuyouzhixiang

CULTURAL REVOLUTION (CR)
UP TP THE MOUNTAIN DOWN TO THE COUNTRYSIDE CAMPAIGN (MC)

1966

Beginning of the CR
mobilized young people
attacked perceived
class enemies

1968

Mao felt losing
control
restored order
Launched MC

17 million young people
were mobilized to do
labor intensive
agriculture work in the
countryside

1976

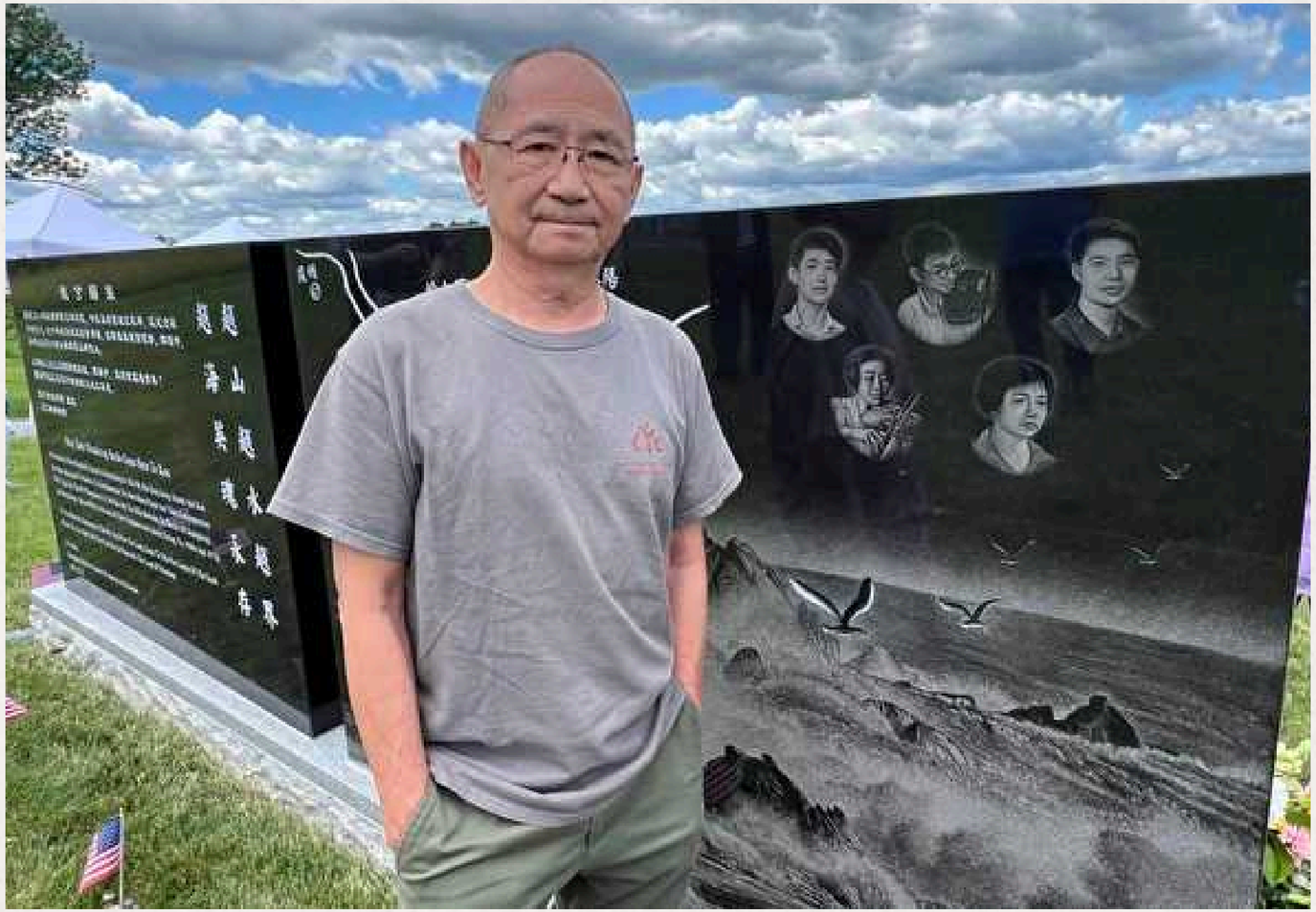
The end of the CR
MC ended two years
later in 1978

Source：BBC

Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

Hong Kong is separated from Guangdong Province by just a river

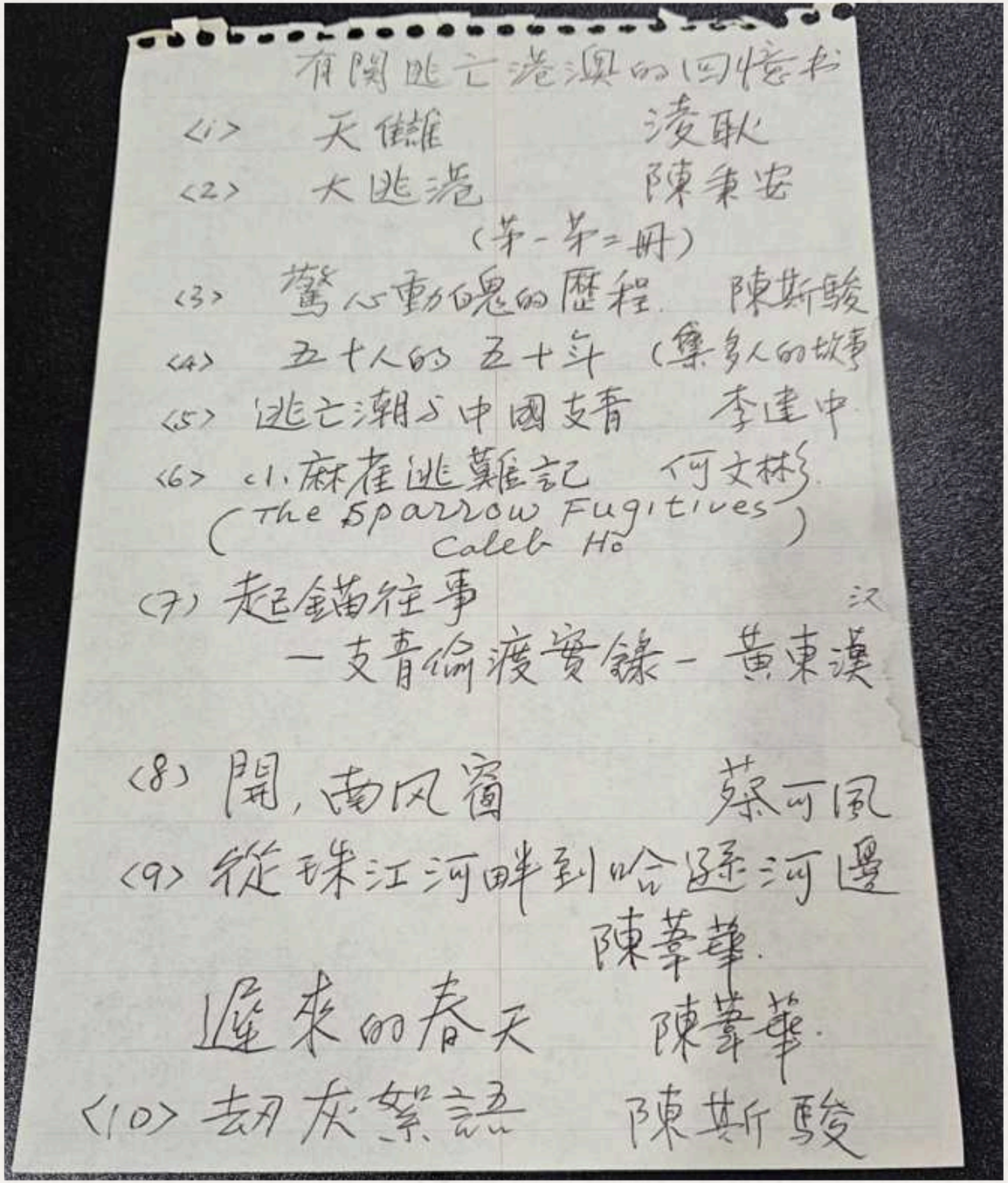
CHEN'S FAMILY



On one side of the second monument, lifelike relief carvings depict portraits of five victims—four of whom were siblings from the Chen family. Their younger brother, Chen Guanli, stood before the monument, paying his respects and gazing at it for a long time.

Research Questions

What living conditions could drive individuals to repeatedly confront the fear of death or detention, risking everything to flee multiple times despite the immense dangers and hardships? How do they make sense of these perilous choices five or six decades later?


有關逃亡港澳的回憶書

〈1〉 天涯 淩耿

〈2〉 大逃港 陳秉安

(第一第二冊)

〈3〉 驚心動魄的歷程 陳斯駿

〈4〉 五十人的五十斗 (集多人的故事

〈5〉 逃亡潮下中國支青 李建中

〈6〉 (1)麻雀逃難記 何文林

(The Sparrow Fugitives)

Caleb Ho

〈7〉 走已鋪往事 汉

一支青偷渡實錄 - 黃東漢

〈8〉 開,南风窗 蔡可風

〈9〉 從珠江河畔到哈遜河邊

陳葦華.

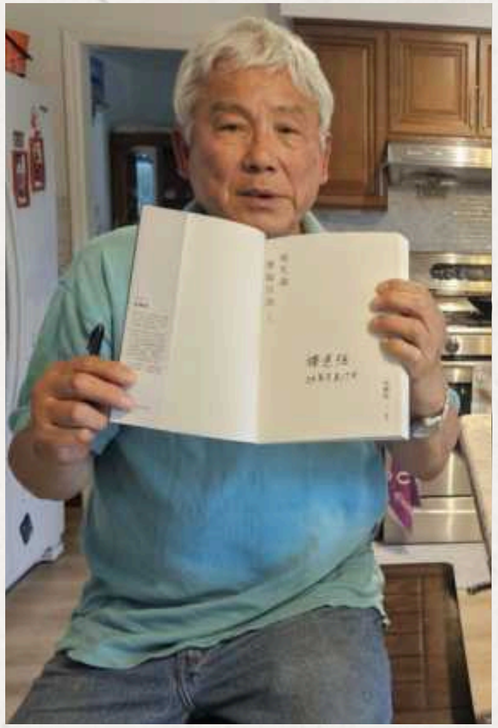
遲來的春天 陳葦華.

〈10〉 劫灰繁語 陳斯駿

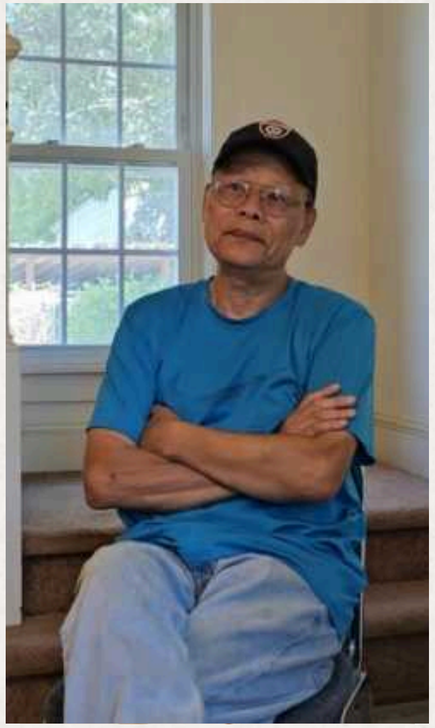
Memoirs

Why has the lived experience of 1.6 million people been left out of academic research?

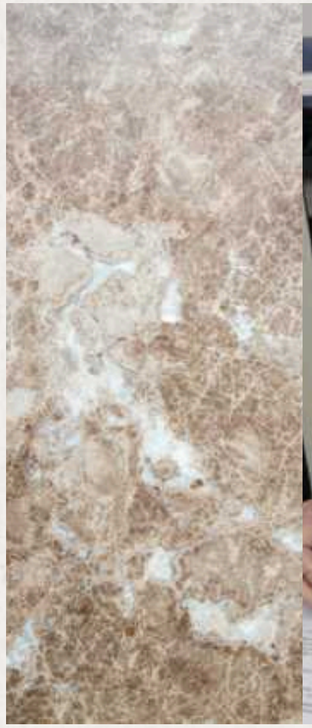
INTERVIEWS



Brother Qiang



Peter Chan



Wendy

Mr. Cai

Sister Song

ARGUMENT
THREE INTERTWINED ASPECTS SHAPED THEIR CHOICES

1.IMMEDIATE CRISIS

2.PAST TRAUMA and Long-standing Injustice

3.CULTURE of ESCAPE

Interview with Huamei in NYC

1. IMMEDIATE CRISIS

The crisis faced by those who fled Guangdong to Hong Kong must be understood within the broader context of the sent-down youth across China.

Resisted state exploitation
-grueling labor with minimal compensation
-struggled to meet basic needs and relied on family support
-harsh living conditions and economic hardship

Deprived of education and personal freedom
Reclaim agency

2. PAST TRAUMA AND LONGSTANDING INJUSTICE

Many individuals made five, six, or even seven or eight escape attempts.
This unwavering commitment was deeply rooted in each family's past experiences, the trauma and long-standing injustices they had suffered.

MR. CAI'S FAMILY HISTORY

Mr. Cai, now retired and living in Chinatown, New York City, attempted to flee to Hong Kong four times before succeeding, enduring repeated detentions.

2. PAST TRAUMA AND LONGSTANDING INJUSTICE

“They received a notice that the factory was classified as ‘Kuomintang bureaucratic capital’ and would be confiscated by the local government. My father immediately prepared detailed financial records and included evidence of the sources of funds. He submitted the documents to the county government, but it was like throwing a stone into the sea. There was no response. Worse, after his funds were frozen, the government pursued him over unpaid wages to workers and sugarcane farmers. My father was arrested and imprisoned for several months, during which he endured severe torture and multiple suicide attempts but survived, inevitably succumbing to insanity.” Mr. Cai

2. PAST TRAUMA AND LONGSTANDING INJUSTICE

“Even then, the county government was relentless. They sent a worker from the sugar factory, along with a military officer, to escort this untried and mentally ill prisoner to Guangzhou. These two individuals brought my father, tied up with ropes, into their house and demanded money to secure his release. If there was no money, they threatened to take him to the public security bureau and lock him away. My mother, panicked and desperate, opened all their boxes and chests, declaring that they could take whatever they wanted as long as they returned her husband. The two men did not hesitate, taking everything they could, following the "great principle of communism." Without issuing any receipts or providing any identification, they untied the ropes, abandoned the prisoner, and left with their spoils, smiling with satisfaction.”

Mr. Cai

2. PAST TRAUMA AND LONGSTANDING INJUSTICE

The torture in prison caused his father to develop schizophrenia, from which he never fully recovered. Because of this criminal record, Mr Cai's father could no longer find employment in society. Ultimately, he had no choice but to start a small business, taking up beekeeping. Later, when public-private partnerships were established and the cities also formed people's communes, even his dreams of beekeeping were crushed.

2. PAST TRAUMA AND LONGSTANDING INJUSTICE

“Eventually, my father sold the entire bee colony to a state-owned farm. However, the farm also failed to manage the bees, leading to mass deaths and escapes, and it never paid the promised purchase price. Overwhelmed with regret and anger, my father suffered another schizophrenia episode. ”

2. PAST TRAUMA AND LONGSTANDING INJUSTICE

Confronted with injustice, entrepreneurs had no means of self-advocacy, as resistance risked humiliation, imprisonment, or worse. Many had no choice but to accept unfair terms imposed by the Party. Witnessing his father's repeated setbacks and inability to protest left a deep impact on Mr. Cai, fostering resentment and disillusionment with the regime. This cumulative disappointment, coupled with his insight into systemic oppression, fueled his determination to escape when the opportunity arose, transforming him from a mild-mannered individual into someone fiercely resilient and unwilling to back down.

3. CULTURE OF ESCAPE

A "culture of escape" inspired these individuals, offering them a chance to envision a better future in Hong Kong—freedom characterized by choices in jobs and living locations, fair pay, educational opportunities, and dignity.

This culture reflected a complex interplay between individual and collective agency.

Their ingenuity, born from suppressed autonomy, erupted like a volcanic explosion, overcoming countless dangers.

Conclusion

"Voting with our feet"


陳冠筠-3中
劉娟龍-3中
馬玉霞-4中
梁治華-4中
陳冠華-8中
陳敏焰-7中
盧志剛-7中
周新年-8中
傅穗生-8中
李育洲13中
李錦程-14中
陳志强-14中
呂國明-14中
黃婉虹-14中
趙俊柱-14中
盧健雄-15
周錦祺-24中
葉　蕨-24中
朱其柔-24中
歐信榮-24中
梁錦坤-35中
梁子雲-36中
李成佳-39中
黎標龍-40中
董錦明-40中
羅文讓-61中
賴錫璋106中
陳建雲-僑中
勞炳昆黃花崗
譚健富黃花崗
鄭超然黃花崗
無名氏鄭女友
葉超華荔僑中
李炳輝荔僑中
葉子維永漢中
羅國禎太平中
雷文森-禺中
梁景泉-禺中
黃禮霞石龍中
榮基石龍中
謝德錄省機校
司徒建國輕校
劉國光-惠州
劉嘉林-廣州
劉志釗-東莞
劉功勛-增江
陳冠明-廣州
陳　浩-廣州
陳乃活-廣州
陳啟豪-東莞
陳思遜-廣州
陳瑩柏-廣州
陳有根-廣州
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唐家驊-廣州
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陳　浩-4中
何　燦-4中
周永年-4中
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彭　昌-29中
譚俊英-29中
譚月英-29中
梁景新-29中
李潤良-31中
温純光-32中
陳慶宏-33中
馮林彬-36中
莫遵全-39中
伍克章-39中
劉挺夫-48中
吳新民-50中
任家偉-51中
李偉里-67中
鄧聿朝-85中
仝　艷-97中
蘇維民-華附
黃樹祥-華附
謝光輝-省實
黎　堅-廣雅
朱小媛-執信
饒必永-僑光
趙永練-僑光
陳永德-僑中
無名氏陳女友
孔落
李振國-西關
陳偉明-沙河
李學担黃花崗
黃國津-技校
翁啟明-技校
蕭國源-華工
馮力行-清小
王　傑-廣州
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陳冠蔚-廣州
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陳城標-廣州
陳世剛-廣州
陳誌遠-廣州
劉國權-廣州
劉素明-廣州
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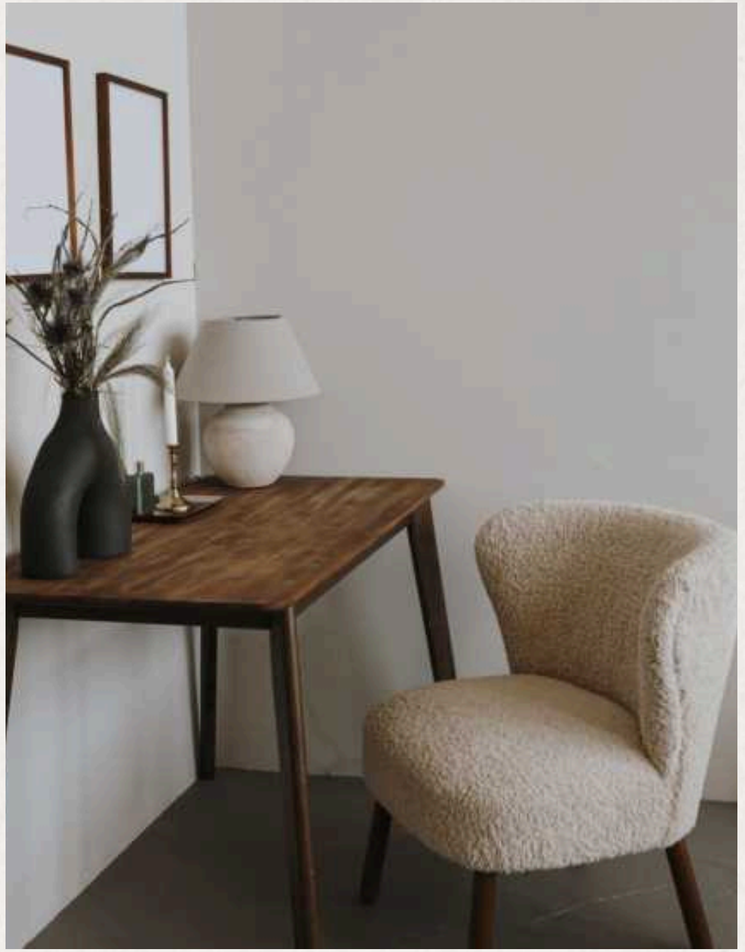
梁慕賢-廣州
無名氏
羅偉雄
吳北祥
杜小舜
譚國麟
譚黔生
鄧建國
周曉
丁志新
李加偉大仲
李加偉紫園大仲

Thank you!

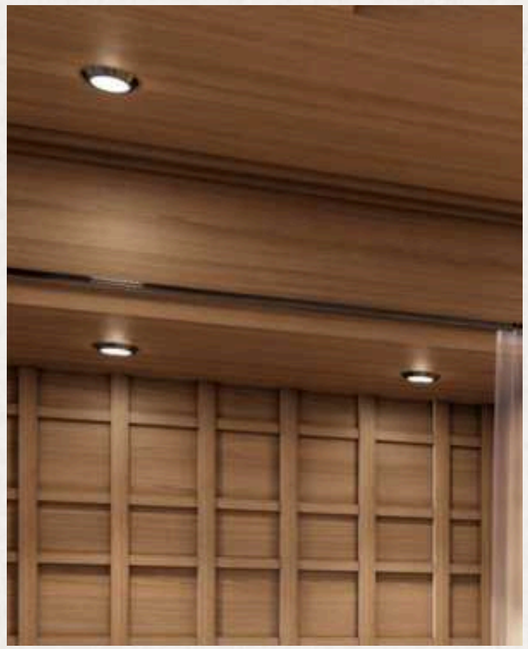
CONCLUSION



LIGHTING

Ambient Light

Task Light



Recessed Lighting Fixtures

Ambient Light

BUDGET

House Plan	$5000
Interior Design	$7000
Visualisation	$2000
Materials	$10000
Renovation	$20000
Furniture	$10000