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'Collateral murder' – Residents and councillors decry sudden loss of iconic wall trees

by VICKY WONG 20:15, 9 AUGUST 2015 Updated 18:19, 31 MARCH 2020



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Local residents and district councillors gathered on Bonham Road on Sunday to protest the [recent felling of four iconic trees rooted in nearby retaining walls](#).

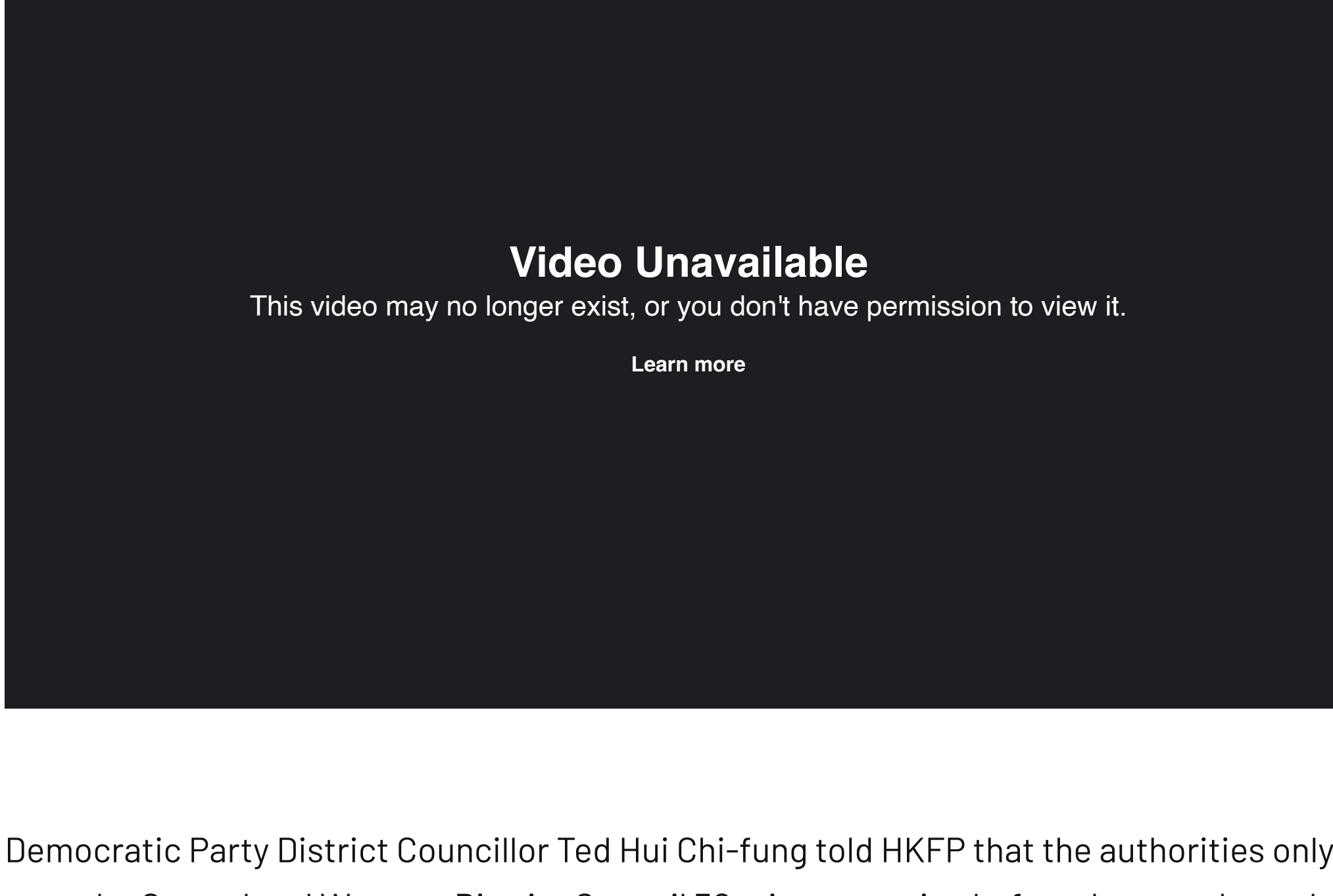
Close to two dozen people mustered around the four stumps at Bonham Road and Centre Street, angry that the decision to remove the historic Banyans had been carried out without consulting the public. The loss of the trees, beloved by many in Sai Ying Pun, was described as "collateral murder" by a prominent tree expert.



Local residents and district councillors protest the government's decision to cut down four Banyan trees. Photo: HKFP

The decision to fell the trees came after another was uprooted at the same intersection during a heavy rainstorm [more than a week ago](#). Two people were injured and taken to Queen Mary's Hospital as a result.

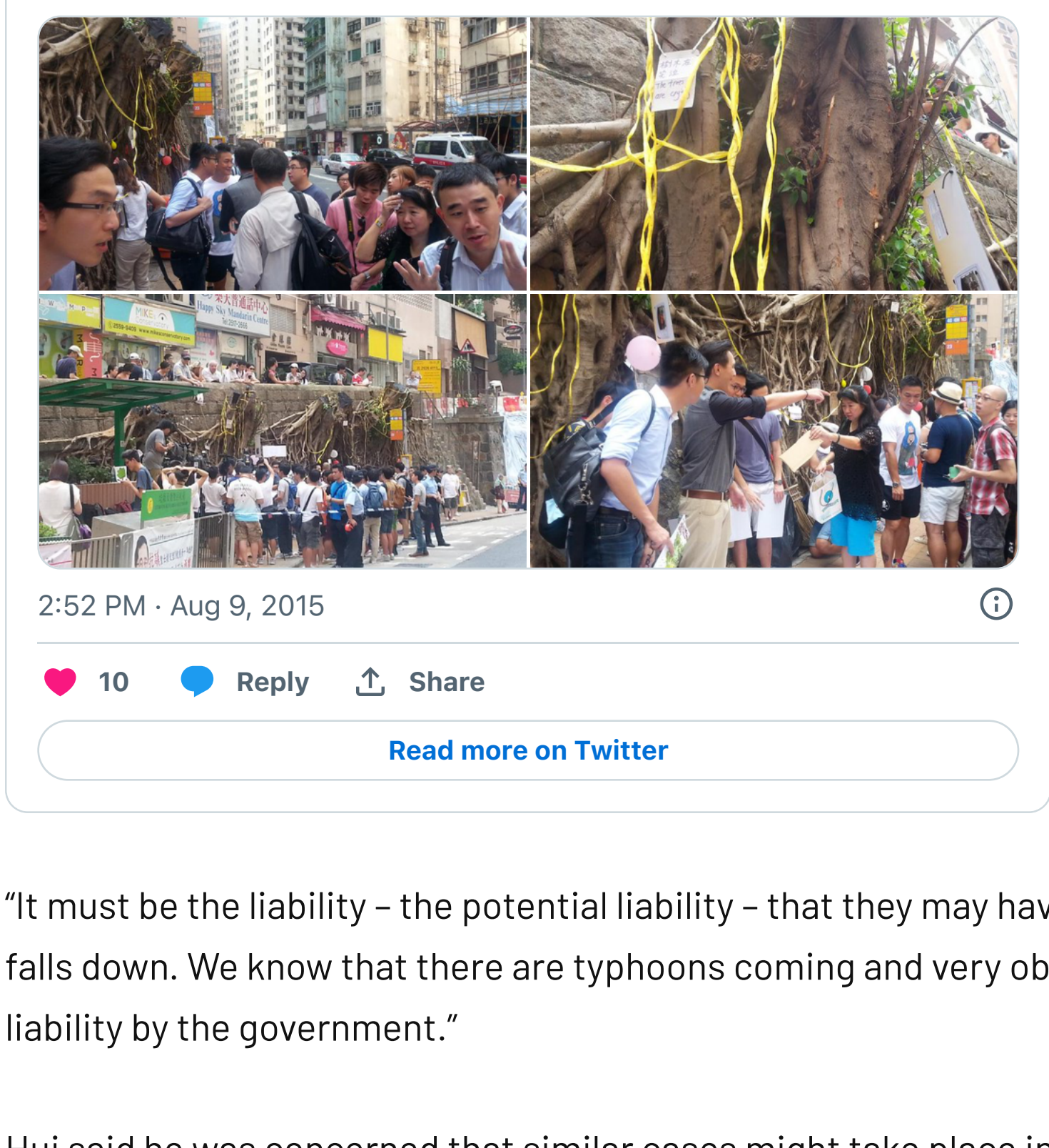
On Friday evening, the Highways Department announced that the four trees were to be taken down owing to public safety concerns. Citing advice from the Tree Management Office (TMO), the department noted that the risk of collapse "could not be entirely alleviated by extensive pruning."



Democratic Party District Councillor Ted Hui Chi-fung told HKFP that the authorities only gave the Central and Western District Council 30 minutes notice before they cut down the trees.

"This is not normal because usually when they have trees to cut... they usually put up a notice and then they fix the date for the felling of the tree," he said.

Hui dismissed suggestions that the trees had to be cut down because there were cracks on the wall, adding that the cracks had been there for a long time.



"It must be the liability – the potential liability – that they may have to shoulder if the tree falls down. We know that there are typhoons coming and very obviously this is an escape of liability by the government."

Hui said he was concerned that similar cases might take place in the future and urged the government to introduce a tree preservation ordinance.



Professor Jim Chi-yong, chair professor of geography at the University of Hong Kong and non-official member of the [Expert Panel on Tree Management](#), described the move as "collateral murder".

He said the expert panel was not informed of the decision to cut down the four trees, adding that he did not know about it until a reporter from Ming Pao phoned him on Friday evening.

"It was done so rapidly, the efficiency is just amazing, it's unthinkable. The condition of the wall and the trees do not warrant such an urgent action... It's totally unreasonable," he said.



One protester holds up a photograph of what the four Banyan trees looked like before they were cut down. Photo: HKFP.

Kerensa Neale, a 45-year-old creative director living in Sai Ying Pun, said she used to walk past the trees everyday and was "devastated".

She told HKFP that the absence of the trees had "changed the whole neighbourhood", adding that the decision to cut them down was "absolutely criminal".

"The wall is going to have to be redone now because these roots are going to die, the whole thing is not going to be safe, it's going to crumble, those trees were holding this wall up."



Mr Chan (left) supported the government's decision to fell the four Banyan trees. Photo: HKFP.

However, 65-year-old Mr Chan, who only gave his last name, told HKFP that the government did the right thing, saying he knew many people who felt unsafe walking underneath the trees along Bonham Road.

He said: "These people protesting against the government's decision – have they thought about the consequences? If there is a typhoon and someone gets hurt, how do they justify that?... I care about trees, but I care about other people's safety more."



Authorities fell four Banyan trees on Bonham Road. Photo: Trailwatch via Facebook.

A set of six wall trees originally stood at the Bonham Road and Centre Street intersection. After the first came down during an amber warning rainstorm on July 22, officials from the TMO initially decided to cut down one tree that was in bad condition and maintained the remaining four.

In 1996, Hong Kong was estimated to have 1,275 trees growing out of 505 retaining walls. With many streets built along flattened slopes, Central and Western District possess the highest concentration of distinctive "stonewall trees" with over one hundred remaining.

Despite their historical pedigree and uniqueness, however, the trees in Sai Ying Pun were not listed on the [Register of Old and Valuable Trees](#).

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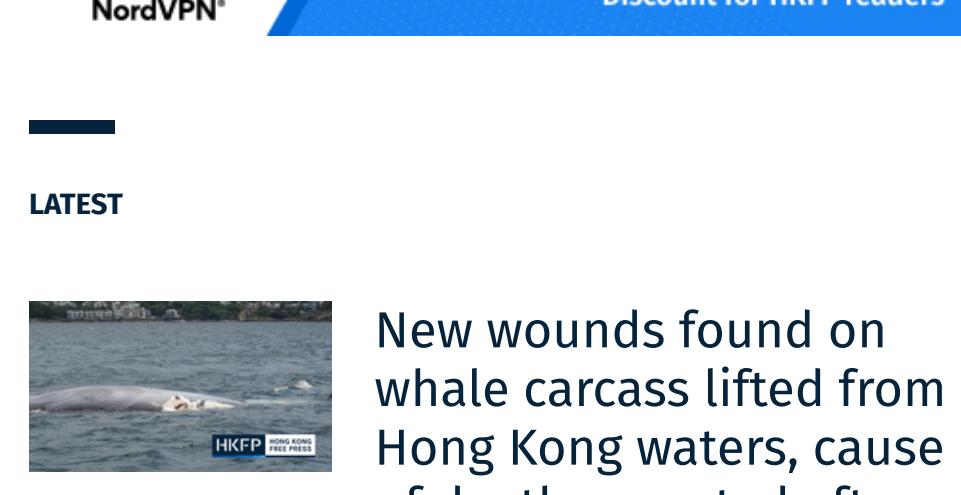
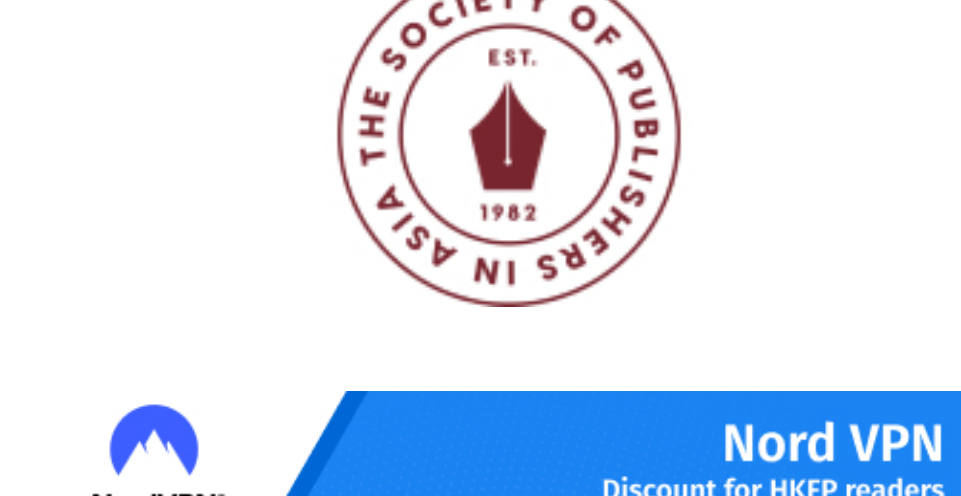
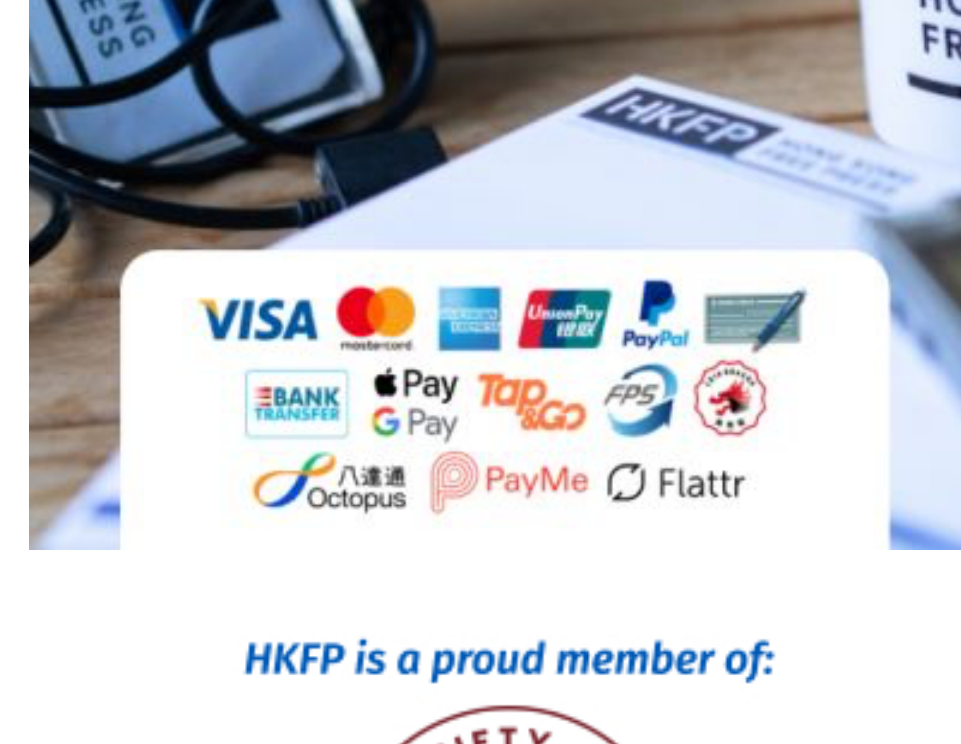
TAGGED: banyan tree Sai Ying Pun

Author bio for Vicky Wong: Vicky is a British-born Chinese journalist with three years of experience covering UK politics. She previously worked for PoliticsHome and has interned at Sky News and CNN International.



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