Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hong Kong

Lok-yin Law

HKU PRESS
香港大學出版社

Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pok Fu Lam Road
Hong Kong
https://hkupress.hku.hk

© 2027 Hong Kong University Press

ISBN 978-988-8946-92-1 (*Paperback*)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, copied, excerpted, or redistributed in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of Hong Kong University Press. Without written authorization, the text and images in any part of this book are strictly prohibited from being used for artificial intelligence training.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by Power Printing Co., Ltd. in Hong Kong, China

Contents

List of Illustrations vi
List of Tables vii
1. Introduction 1
2. The Past: A Historical Overview of Intangible Traditions in Hong Kong 27
3. The Present: Local Communities and the National Agenda – ICH Policy and Its Impact on Local Traditions 66
4. The Future: De-localization, Digitalization, and Touristification of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Post-Pandemic Hong Kong 103
5. Conclusion 130
Acknowledgements 135
References 138

Illustrations

Figure 1.1: Paintings of High Bun Mountains 3
Figure 2.1: Hong Kong Tourist Association poster with elements of the Bun Festival in the 1960s 60
Figure 3.1: Tai O Dragon Boat Water Parade 79
Figure 3.2: Inclusive Fire Dragon making workshop in Pok Fu Lam 95
Figure 5.1: Yuen Long bamboo theatre, December 2023 131

Tables

Table 2.1: Annual customs recorded in the Kangxi version of the *Xin'an County Gazetteer* (Jin 1688/1962) 31
Table 2.2: List of Yulan Festivals in 1980 40
Table 2.3: List of Yulan Festivals in 2024 44
Table 3.1: Hong Kong's ICH Inventory, December 2024 73
Table 3.2: Historical development timeline of ICH works in Hong Kong 75

1
Introduction

Shortened Bun Mountains

Every year during the fifth lunar month (typically between 21 May and 21 June), the grand Tai Ping Ching Jiu festival (太平清醮, Daoist Offering for Peace and Purity), commonly known as the Bun Festival, is held on Cheung Chau, one of Hong Kong's outlying islands. This popular festival includes religious ceremonies led by Daoist priests from the Hailufeng (海陸豐) area of China, with the dual aim of redeeming lost souls and praying for blessings for the islanders (Choi 2003; Lu and Chen 2024). Beyond the ritual processions and various sacrificial activities held during the ceremonies, what distinguishes the Bun Festival is the erection of three bun mountains (包山, towers made of buns) as offerings at the ritual site. Metal-constructed bun mountains are also erected in a nearby park for competition purposes. This grand annual event is not only a popular festival attended by most islanders but also an avenue for Hong Kong and international tourists to experience traditional local culture. Historically, the festival's three bun mountains were intended for islanders to scramble for buns, but the government banned such activities in 1978 (Ma 2022). During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the festival became exceptionally

valuable as a representation of normal life. The resumption of normal social life in 2023 therefore made the festival especially significant.

However, the Cheung Chau Tai Ping Ching Jiu Organizing Committee (長洲太平清醮值理會) announced that, owing to the contractor's inability to complete the three usual bun mountains as scheduled, the bun mountains would be replaced with hanging paintings and small conical iron-framed bun mountains (Lu and Chen 2024). The announcement immediately drew strong public criticism on the internet, with accusations that the organizers were disrespecting history and tradition. Critics unanimously charged the organizers with destroying a centuries-old tradition and lacking respect for their predecessors' efforts to protect their cultural inheritance. While heartfelt, these criticisms overlooked a number of practical needs and considerations (including the effect of COVID-19, cost, and labour), the continual changes in the presentation of the bun mountains over the years (from an initial two to three, from the buns being placed on a table, to people scrambling for buns, etc.), and, more importantly, the inventiveness and variability of traditional culture in contemporary society (Hobsbawm 1983).

This opening account illustrates the kinds of cultural practices that lie at the heart of this study. They are locally meaningful yet increasingly subject to institutional categorization and political framing. At the same time, they are not static survivals from a distant past but practices that continually adapt to new contexts. Recent experiences in Hong Kong show that heritage traditions are constantly being reinterpreted: they do not look the same today as they did in earlier generations, and public interest in them has shifted. In the aftermath of COVID-19, for instance, a wave of nostalgia stimulated new forms of engagement with heritage, as people sought continuity, belonging, and collective memory in a time of disruption. These dynamics underscore the dual background that informs this book: the mutable nature of cultural practices



Figure 1.1: Paintings of High Bun Mountains (May 2023). Photograph courtesy of Yumi Cheng.

themselves and the changing ways in which Hong Kong society relates to them. To elucidate how cultural practices have come to be defined, governed, and contested in Hong Kong, this introduction proceeds by first situating the research focus and questions, then reviewing the relevant scholarship and conceptual debates, and finally outlining the structure of the book.

History of Heritage in Asian and Global Contexts

The social value of cultural relics or cultural heritage began to be highlighted in East Asia in the twentieth century. The Korean Peninsula had been under Japanese rule since 1910, when the Korean Empire (大韓帝國) was forced to sign the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty. In 1919, the March 1st Movement (三一運動) led to the implementation of cultural rule, and Koreans were allowed to use their own script and language in daily life. Although Japan did not destroy Korea's cultural traditions to any significant extent during this period, researching and preserving cultural relics became an important means for Korean literati and wealthy merchants to protect their cultural heritage and demonstrate their national spirit. For example, rice merchant Jeon Hyeong-pil (全鎣弼, 1906–1962), founder of the Gansong Art Museum, established the Bohwagak (葆華閣) in 1938 to repurchase and/or search for various Korean traditional cultural relics at home and abroad, especially in Japan, for preservation and research (Jang 2020). In founding this private museum, Jeon was deeply influenced by the belief in the need to rescue cultural relics advocated by artist and Korean independence activist Oh Se-chang (吳世昌, 1864–1953) (Kim 2018). The cultural traditions of the nation became the material basis for the pursuit of nationalism by many East Asian intellectuals, who began to raise awareness of and concern for traditional culture. The preservation or display of the nation's cultural traditions became

a common tool for expressing national identity in East Asian countries. Like Korea, Hong Kong also experienced colonial administration that fundamentally altered its cultural landscape, and the contemporary transformation of its indigenous cultural traditions inevitably reflects the complex interplay and entanglement between societal dynamics and colonial legacies.

The Second World War triggered the need for mass-scale reconstruction in countries around the world, both the victors and the defeated, and the international community began to place greater emphasis on the protection of cultural traditions. Two major events began to shift people's mindset towards the need for such protection. In 1950, Kinkaku-ji Temple (金閣寺) in Kyoto, Japan suffered an arson attack that destroyed the temple buildings and a number of cultural relics. In the fire's wake, both Japan and the international community began to pay more attention to protecting historical relics and architecture, especially to methods of recreating their original appearance using appropriate techniques (Serizawa and Sunami 2019). The second event concerned the Abu Simbel temples in Egypt, which had a history of over 3,000 years and faced the possibility of being submerged by the construction of the Aswan Dam in 1960. The temples' eventual relocation from their original site was regarded as an important attempt by the world to protect cultural heritage and ancient monuments although the approach chosen may not be one recommended by today's conservationists. With the support of several Western countries, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) successfully passed the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972. The international community subsequently launched various collaborations to protect cultural relics and architecture and to assess the conservation value of monuments (Cleere 2011).

However, the 1972 convention was deeply influenced by the Western interpretation of cultural heritage (emphasizing materiality, commemorative nature, and authenticity) (Smith 2006). The cultural values of many non-Western societies differ from the convention's standards. For example, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia traditionally repainted pigments on ancient rock art (Mowljarlai et al. 1988), and ancient buildings in China, Japan, and Korea are regularly renovated, practices that run counter to the authenticity emphasized in many international charters (Chung 2005). Therefore, since the 1970s, representatives of non-Western countries have repeatedly advocated for the implementation of efforts to protect intangible cultural heritage (ICH) at UNESCO conferences, advocacy that scholars regard as a challenge to the Western approach to protecting cultural relics and architecture (Aikawa 2004). Among these efforts, the Bolivian government in 1973 submitted a proposal to UNESCO calling for the protection of folklore in the hope of drawing international attention to the importance of protecting folklore forms and processes. International discussions expressing concern for folklore ensued.

Until the 1990s, however, those discussions remained at the level of advocacy for protecting/safeguarding traditional folklore. Such advocacy was quickly criticized for potentially leading to direct official intervention in heritage protection, leaving producers and local residents unable to control the direction of cultural heritage protection or have their wishes considered (Blake 2001). Official protection did not fully reflect the essence of ICH or its significance in human society, and the concept of intangible culture had yet to be fully advocated. The focus remained on the protection of material architecture and the rescue of cultural relics.

Taking Hong Kong as an example, the transformation process of cultural heritage conservation was also influenced by regional and international factors. Although UNESCO adopted the Convention

Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972, Hong Kong, then under colonial administration, did not pass the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance until 1976, simultaneously establishing the Antiquities Advisory Board, which comprised experts tasked with studying valuable cultural relic preservation schemes and an executive department called the Antiquities and Monuments Office (Barber 2022).

Before the establishment of this ordinance and board, Hong Kong placed relatively little emphasis on protecting material cultural artefacts, particularly colonial buildings, and gave little, if any, consideration to conservation and reuse. For instance, in the 1960s, when the Hong Kong government decided to build an underground metro on Hong Kong Island, it dismantled the landmark General Post Office, which had been completed in 1911. With the exception of preserving a number of building components for museum display, the entire post office site was cleared, a move that was seen as key to urban progress. It was not until 1969 that the demolition of Tsim Sha Tsui Railway Station began to draw Hong Kong society's attention to the need to protect old objects. Some members of the non-Chinese community publicly advocated for the station's complete preservation, including prominent business leader Lawrence Kadoorie. In 1977, Hong Kong hosted a Pacific Area Travel Association conference, during which Lord Duncan-Sandys, the president of Europa Nostra, a pan-European cultural heritage federation, delivered a speech that influenced David Russell, a professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Hong Kong, to actively advocate for the preservation of Tsim Sha Tsui Railway Station, issuing calls to the Hong Kong government and even Queen Elizabeth II. Russell and a group of conservationists later founded the Hong Kong Heritage Society, Hong Kong's first advocacy organization related to architectural conservation (Law 2024). However, the majority Chinese community of the day did not actively respond, and

the authorities continued to maintain that colonial architecture lacked sufficient historical value to justify relocating the railway station's main buildings. Instead, they merely preserved the clock tower, which had a longer history, and relocated several columns to a nearby park (Chan 2019).

At the time, the term 'heritage' was translated into Chinese as *Wenwu* (文物). For example, the aforementioned Hong Kong Heritage Society took *Wenwu* as its name (University of Hong Kong Libraries, n.d.). When the government converted Ping Shan Police Station into the Tang Heritage Gallery, the Chinese characters used were also those for *Wenwu*. In 1997, the Year of Heritage was translated as '*Wenwu* Year', and the Heritage Trails in Ping Shan and Lung Yeuk Tau also used the term. The adoption of *Wenwu* as the translation of 'heritage' perfectly captured the understanding of heritage in Hong Kong at that time as material buildings and physical objects. Traditions such as folklore and artisanry were generally not understood as 'heritage', in line with the international trends of the time.

More sustained international discussion of ICH emerged in the 1990s, when the international community began to recognize the practitioners and disseminators of cultural heritage (Aikawa 2004), and non-Western scholars also began to question the legitimacy of heritage lists (Aikawa-Faure 2009). The term 'intangible cultural heritage' was first used in UN discussions in 1993, and, in 1994, a number of countries, led by Japan and Korea, endorsed the Nara Document, thereby challenging fixed notions of authenticity (Lowenthal 1994). It opened the way to a more historically and culturally situated understanding of authenticity, meaning cultural heritage in long-term historical application, and specifying that the practical application of authenticity must consider cultural time and space and cultural differences. This move expanded the definition of cultural heritage to fit the characteristics of traditional cultural safeguarding in various locales.

It also greatly promoted the protection of non-architectural cultural traditions.

UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage ('ICH Convention' hereinafter) also sparked academic discussion on the adaptability of international conventions in various countries (Smith 2006, 108–13). Scholars began to consider how cultural heritage involves power relations, ideologies, and discursive expressions and constructions, thereby influencing its maintenance methods, relationship with communities, and international interactions. In this context, Laurajane Smith's *Uses of Heritage* (2006) strongly criticizes the 'authorized heritage discourse' (AHD) that controls the selection of cultural heritage through expert and state power, pointing out that past heritage protection and management standards have ignored cultural diversity. Existing heritage methods have also led to the exclusion of group diversity, and, more importantly, past charters and principles have all emphasized materiality, focusing on archaeological data and texts, thereby losing the connection between people and heritage. Finally, Smith points out that AHD is a discourse of cultural hegemony, the academic standards behind it still reflecting a Eurocentric perspective (Yu and Zhang 2020).

Therefore, the *Uses of Heritage* also formed the paradigm and trend of critical heritage studies. In 2012, the first conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies was held, collecting over 500 conference papers (Association of Critical Heritage Studies 2025). With Smith as the editor-in-chief and scholars from around the world as collaborators, the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* continues to disseminate theoretical studies and case explorations of critical heritage (Harrison 2012, 111). Smith's *Uses of Heritage*, now regarded as a classic in the field (Skrede and Hølleland 2018), posits that the memory behaviours generated in heritage can be seen as an important pathway to understanding and participating in contemporary society. In

other words, the concepts within heritage are themselves constructed, reconstructed, or negotiated intangible culture and values. At the same time, Smith also believes that cultural heritage is a non-solidified form of culture. Critical heritage studies do not negate the value of heritage protection but aim to combine heritage issues with various social discourses, such as experience, identity, memory, and local diversity, to explore the various political and social actions and power relations behind heritage (Kung and Yao 2018). Therefore, heritage is not only the basis for exploring the past but also an entry point for thinking about how different eras shape particular discourses.

Building on this critical heritage perspective, other scholars have expanded the lens. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) has argued that heritage is not simply a neutral reflection of existing practices but a form of 'metacultural production' in which cultural expressions are reframed through listing, documentation, and institutional recognition. From this perspective, safeguarding initiatives not only preserve but also reshape practices, creating new forms of cultural value while altering how communities understand their own traditions. This insight is particularly relevant for Hong Kong, where official heritage interventions have frequently redefined the meaning and visibility of local customs.

In the context of the Chinese mainland, the edited collection by Christina Maags and Marina Svensson (2018) demonstrates how heritage operates as a field of governmentality, wherein the state deploys heritage to consolidate legitimacy while local actors contest, negotiate, or appropriate official discourses. The collection's analyses show that the Chinese mainland's AHD is far from monolithic; ruptures and contradictions continually emerge between central policy, local implementation, and grassroots participation.

Complementing this perspective, Harriet Evans and Michael Rowlands (2021) foreground everyday, bottom-up engagements with

heritage. Drawing on ethnographic case studies, their edited volume highlights how communities interpret, transform, and even resist official heritage categories. By tracing how ordinary people attribute meaning to practices, places, and rituals, their work reminds us that heritage is shaped not only by state agendas or UNESCO frameworks but also by the lived values of those whose cultural practices are being redefined.

The aforementioned studies demonstrate that both top-down and bottom-up dynamics are crucial to understanding how heritage is produced in the Chinese mainland, and they provide valuable context for examining Hong Kong. In the Hong Kong case, tensions emerge not only between state frameworks and community practices but also between state agendas and global policy discourses. This dual tension highlights Hong Kong's position at the intersection of local, national, and international heritage regimes and sets the stage for considering how recent global shifts, including what Chiara Bortolotto (2025) calls the 'sustainabilization' of ICH, resonate in the city.

Bortolotto (2025) argues that global heritage policy has indeed shifted towards ICH sustainabilization. Rather than being framed solely as fragile survivals from the past, ICH elements are now being positioned as dynamic resources that can address such urgent concerns as environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and even public health. In this sustainabilization turn, ICH safeguarding is imagined not simply as protecting traditions but as enabling heritage itself to protect communities in the future. This evolving paradigm provides an important backdrop for understanding recent policy trends in Hong Kong, where funding schemes and official publications have highlighted both the cultural continuity and prospective social functions of ICH. Against this global and China-specific backdrop, Chinese society's understanding of traditional matters has often been shaped by the political, social, and economic interventions of different eras. From the

Republican period to the establishment of New China in the 1950s, China defined local traditions as 'feudal superstitions' and prohibited them. For instance, in September 1928, the Nanjing Nationalist government promulgated the Measures for Abolishing Divination, Astrology, Witchcraft, and Geomancy (廢除卜筮星相巫覡堪輿辦法), forcing the relevant practitioners to engage in other – legitimate – occupations (Li 2007, 46). In July 1929, the Guangzhou municipal government established a customs reform committee to promote anti-superstition policies. In 1930, *Shun Pao* newspaper also reported that certain departments of the Nationalist government had banned the Yulan Festival (also known as the Hungry Ghost Festival) in the belief that it was only foolish men and women who remained superstitious and set up altars to offer sacrifices and relief to homeless ghosts (*Shenbao* 1930). Like the Yulan Festival, many customs and religious practices were suppressed to varying degrees during this period. In New China, customs involving ghost and god beliefs were strictly forbidden. However, with the intervention of the ICH concept, these once-banned customs gained an opportunity to be reborn, preserved on the land of China through a process of purification. This change illustrates that the transformation of cultural heritage forms is key to the way an era shapes the concept of heritage.

In Hong Kong, by contrast, under the British policy of divide and rule, non-interference in the development of the New Territories, and the prevention of ethnic conflicts, various Chinese customs and traditions were permitted to continue in similar or transformed forms under the constraints of the British government's administrative management and laws. During the colonial administration, Hong Kong continued to inherit traditional folklore recorded in the local chronicles of Lingnan – a broader geographic and cultural region in southern China comprising present-day Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Hong Kong, and Macao – and became a space for the preservation of

traditional practices within Chinese society in the twentieth century. This unique social and cultural context has resulted in the study of Hong Kong's ICH exhibiting particular features, including (1) the connection with colonial governance, (2) the influence of Chinese nationalism, and (3) the acceptance of the global ICH concept by local communities. The study of ICH is not only a tool for anthropology and sociology to investigate community behaviour; it is also a part of cultural history. More importantly, it examines how a community's memory and forgetting of history are reshaped by contemporary political, social, and cultural factors, making the community firmly believe in its own traditions.

Having established the scope and objectives of this book, it is necessary to situate the project within existing scholarship on ICH in Hong Kong and beyond. The following section reviews the main contributions of such scholarship, identifies gaps therein, and highlights how this book seeks to build upon and extend current debates.

Overview of ICH Research in Hong Kong

From around 2010, scholarship on ICH in Hong Kong began to develop along three main lines: theory, fieldwork, and policy analysis. Historians and sociologists had already conducted substantial research on the local history of the New Territories, identifying the legacy and structure of traditional Chinese society (Siu 1993; Li 2020). The study of ICH in Hong Kong intersects with several key themes in contemporary heritage studies: the effect of urbanization on traditional practices, the role of heritage in identity formation, and the transformation of local customs in response to global recognition processes. This overview examines the existing literature through these lenses, highlighting the evolving understanding of ICH within Hong Kong's unique cultural landscape.

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN HONG KONG

'A handsome volume introducing the timely subject of intangible cultural heritage from its precursors in old Hong Kong through the onset of ICH discourse in the new millennium to its latest permutations under COVID-19, filled with colourful details and cogent analyses. The study of ICH in Hong Kong is in good hands.'

—**Wing Chung Ng**, department chair and professor of history, University of Texas at San Antonio

'Not much has been written on Hong Kong's intangible cultural heritage. This very important book covers the past, present, and future of ICH, giving us a better understanding of how traditions have changed dramatically because of COVID-19 and new technology, and how communities are essential to keeping these traditions alive.'

—**Florence Padovani**, director, French Centre for Research on Contemporary China

---

Although the idea of intangible cultural heritage has existed since the beginning of the twentieth century, awareness and efforts to recognize it in Hong Kong only began in earnest in the 1990s. This book covers intangible cultural heritage in Hong Kong, examining the influence of local policies of the past, societal change, and national-level alignment with Beijing's cultural main melody, transforming recognition of Hong Kong's heritage into what it is today.

Lok-yin Law is assistant professor at the Department of Chinese Language Studies, the Education University of Hong Kong.

Anthropology / Public Policy

ISBN 978-988-8946-92-1

9 789888 946921

香港大學出版社
HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://hkupress.hku.hk

Printed and bound in Hong Kong, China