

Research Assessment Exercise 2020

Impact Case Study

University: The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Unit of Assessment: 35-Area Studies, Cultural Studies and Other Arts/Humanities

Title of Case Study: Safeguarding Hong Kong's Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. Summary of the impact

In 2006 the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) came into force globally, with signatories required to make a full inventory of items to safeguard. On the basis of his extensive studies on the traditions, customs, and religions of southern China, in particular Hong Kong, cultural anthropologist Professor Liu Tik-sang and the South China Research Center he directs at HKUST were commissioned by the Hong Kong government to conduct a survey and compile a list of proposed items for the city's ICH inventory. The team's territory-wide investigation, involving nearly 800 cases, led to the government's ratification of 480 items in 2014 in the first Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory of Hong Kong, leading to (1) a series of government policies and actions to safeguard Hong Kong's intangible cultural heritage; (2) enhancement of Hong Kong tourism activities for mainland and overseas visitors, benefiting the city's economy and national and international profile; (3) greater affinity among the younger generation for sustaining heritage practices; and (4) raising of public awareness and engagement with the community's rich heritage.

2. Underpinning research

Over the past 20 years, research by Liu and the South China Research Center has explored the role of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in shaping society in Hong Kong and the neighboring region, ICH being defined by UNESCO as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated with them – recognized by groups and individuals in a territory as part of their cultural heritage [R7]. In 1997, Liu established the cross-disciplinary research center within the Division of Humanities for this purpose, with its Pearl River office opened in Nansha in 2007. Staffed by three faculty, a research associate, and five research assistants, the center collects and preserves source materials, records event rituals, and publishes – jointly with the Center for Historical Anthropology at Sun Yat-sen University – the biannual *Journal of History and Anthropology* and quarterly newsletter *Fieldwork and Documents*. Between 2010 and 2017, it received a UGC Area of Excellence grant totaling HK\$4,104,471.

Liu has established himself as a leading scholar of folkways and popular religion in the South China region. His research on communal religious observances, temple festivals, temple alliances, Cantonese opera, *fengshui*, dragon boat parade, and fire dragon dance demonstrates the enduring importance of these cultural practices, as well as their unique adaptability to changing social and economic contexts. While all popular religious activities were prohibited in the mainland from the early 1950s until the late 1970s, many practices were sustained in Hong Kong [R3]. The city's rapid growth has weakened social ties that structured these traditional religious communities. Scholars of Hong Kong's cultural traditions thus play an important role in safeguarding ICH today [R6]. For example, Liu's extensive participant observation fieldwork on local practices associated with the goddess Tian Hou/Mazu, one of the most important deities in South China, has shown how such ICH has played a key role in the structuring of social relations, power hierarchies, and strategies for popular mobilization in the villages of Hong Kong's New Territories [R1, R2, R3]. Another major repository of ICH relates to the ways of life and religious practices of Tai O fishing community on Lantau Island in the New Territories and its famous Dragon Boat Water Parade. Liu's book on Tai O was the first extended study of this community and its cultural practices [R4]. He has also explored links between ICH and the economy in research on the market for fresh chickens suitable for ritual offerings and the social response of farmers to epidemic disease among their poultry stocks [R5].

The South China Research Center's expertise on local ICH made it uniquely placed to undertake the Hong Kong government's 2007 commission for a pilot study for the ICH inventory survey, and

2009 mandate to carry out the survey and create a territory-wide list of ICH items. After Liu and 12 research assistants investigated nearly 800 cases over a three-year period [R7], subsequent public consultation led to the government's formal ratification of a 480-item ICH inventory of oral traditions, performing arts, social rituals, festive events, and knowledge practices concerning nature and traditional craftsmanship. Reflecting the importance of this research for Hong Kong, Liu was awarded a Certificate of Commendation "for making outstanding contributions to the development of arts and culture" by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Hong Kong Government, in 2012.

3. References to the research

[R1] Liu Tik-sang. 2000. *The Cult of Tian Hou (Empress of Heaven) in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. [in Chinese]

[R2] Liu Tik-sang. 2002. "The Construction of Local Identity: The Cultural Interpretation of Tian Hou Cult in Hong Kong," In *A Carnival of Gods: Studies of Religions in Hong Kong*, pp. 222-35, edited by Qingshen Chen. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. [in Chinese]

[R3] Liu Tik-sang. 2003. "A Nameless but Active Religion: An Anthropologist's View of Local Religion in Hong Kong and Macau." *China Quarterly* 174: 373-94.

[R4] Liu Tik-sang and Siu-woo Cheung. 2006. *Tai O: Study of Local History*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. [in Chinese]

[R5] Liu Tik-sang. 2008. "Custom, Taste and Science: Raising Chickens in the Pearl River Delta Region, South China." *Anthropology & Medicine* 15: 7-18.

[R6] Liu Tik-sang. 2011. "'Tradition' versus 'Property Inherited': The Construction of Meanings for Hong Kong's Intangible Cultural Heritage." In *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Local Communities in East Asia*, pp. 258-82, edited by Liu Tik-sang. Hong Kong: South China Research Center; Hong Kong Heritage Museum.

[R7] South China Research Center, HKUST. 2013. Report of the Territory-wide Survey of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hong Kong. LC Paper No. CB(2)1299/12-13(05) Annex B. <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr12-13/english/panels/ha/papers/ha0614cb2-1299-5-e.pdf>

4. Details of the impact

Academic and applied research by Liu and the South China Research Center, culminating in the Survey of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) [R7, S1], has had a significant *impact on policy*, by influencing government decisions in identifying and promoting items of ICH; *economic impact* through the use of cultural heritage activities to promote tourism; *impact on culture* by playing a key role in preserving and reviving traditional cultures in Hong Kong and promoting public appreciation of them; and *impact on education* through curricula initiatives to promote ICH. The major beneficiaries have been policymakers and government officials; arts, cultural and religious groups; the public of all ages, and mainland China and overseas tourists.

(a) Policy impact: directly influencing Hong Kong policy on intangible cultural heritage

The ICH survey work, undertaken by Liu and his team, led to the adoption of 480 ICH items, ranging from Cantonese opera and oral traditions to egg tarts and milk tea [S1, S2], as Hong Kong's first ICH inventory in 2014. In the 2015 Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced that government would, in response, enhance ICH safeguarding measures. Later that year, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department's Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit was upgraded to an Intangible Cultural Heritage Office; and an Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre set up in 2016 to serve as an exhibition and education hub for public activities. An Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative List of 20 items was drawn up in 2017 by the government's Intangible Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee, with Liu appointed (since 2015) as a committee member. The list provides the government with a basis for prioritizing resources and safeguarding measures for ICH items of high cultural value and urgent need for preservation. One criterion for selection is "the item has been inscribed onto the ICH inventory of Hong Kong" (Legislative Council discussion paper/Home Affairs Panel/2017). Both the Tian Hou Festival and Tai O Dragon Boat Water Parade [R1-4, R6] are included in the inventory and

representative list, and, with Liu's support, on China's national ICH list compiled in 2011. Curator of Hong Kong's ICH Office Chau Hing-wah attested that many of Liu's suggestions in his 2007 pilot report *"have become major references for our subsequent safeguarding works in the later stages. Throughout the process we have been fortunate to have Prof. Liu's solid field research and publication[s] as reference for inventory-making. ... In sum, Prof. Liu's research findings have contributed significantly in establishing Hong Kong's ICH inventory system"* [S3]. Liu is also on his second term (2016-18, 2018-20) as an appointed non-official member of the Town Planning Board. In testimony, its chairman Bernadette Linn, Permanent Secretary for Development (Planning and Lands) noted his input as a *"staunch guardian of historical and cultural preservation"* [S4].

(b) Economic impact: promoting tourism through intangible cultural heritage

Tourism is one of Hong Kong's major economic sectors. While Hong Kong's own population is around 7.4 million, some 65 million visitors (78% from mainland China) arrived in 2018, generating associated spending of HK\$328.2 billion [HK Tourism Commission 2019]. Alongside the ICH inventory and representative list, strengthening tourism sector cooperation to promote traditional festivals and Hong Kong's ICH to overseas visitors was proposed by the government [Legco Paper CB(2)855/16-17(06) – Feb 2017], and nurturing the development of cultural tourism and heritage tourism became one of four main strategies in the 2017 Development Blueprint for Hong Kong's Tourism Industry [Oct 2017]. The official Hong Kong tourism board website includes a "Living Culture" section, featuring many ICH items, among them the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance, which requires over 200 participants to carry the 67-meter dragon for each performance. In testimony, dance team commander Chan Tak-fai noted that after Liu successfully helped the dance join China's national ICH list in 2011, the Hong Kong government started to invite the team to perform at the city's annual Mid-Autumn Lantern Festival, with the community's own three-day event actively promoted by the Hong Kong Tourism Board and other travel-related websites [S5]. Attendance at the festival has increased from 26,000 in 2016 to 33,350 in 2018 [HK Police Force].

Since 2015, Liu has also assisted the management of Hong Kong's UNESCO Global Geopark of China as an expert advisor. Geopark Head Dr KM Yeung affirmed Liu's research had *"greatly expanded our knowledge and inspired us to explore the cultural heritage of our Geopark communities in a much greater depth, opening a new dimension for Hong Kong Geoparks"* and *"has been indispensable for starting and maintaining systematic records and analyses of this intangible cultural heritage, which could otherwise be completely lost in a couple of generations"*. He also noted: *"Our work in these areas is now widely recognised by the UNESCO Global Geoparks Council as learning models for other UNESCO geoparks. This helps build the Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark brand."* It has benefited the Geopark communities *"through local development and the creation of new jobs and opportunities"* and helped the park enrich its tourist experience through the geopark's *"much improved knowledge framework"*, Yeung said [S6]. The park has received 1.5 million visitors annually from Hong Kong and overseas in the five years to 2018 [Geopark survey].

(c) Cultural impact: sustaining local traditions and national awareness of Hong Kong's heritage

In 2013, the Joint Association of Traditional Hakka Unicorn in Sai Kung and Hang Hau, sought Liu's guidance in writing and assembling its submission to enter China's national list. Chairman Lau Kam-tong attested they had asked Liu because of *"his thorough understanding of the Sai Kung community"*, the result of his on-going research since the millennium [S7]. The dance was successfully ratified in 2014. To date, only 10 Hong Kong items have been elevated to the national list, with Liu assisting three of them. The success of the application inspired younger members of the community to keep this tradition alive. Lau stated: *"After the Hakka unicorn dance became a national-level project, it indeed brought positive influence. Some Hakka villages in different parts of Hong Kong also resumed the training for their dance teams. ... The younger generation of villagers have begun to voluntarily participate in conservation work, continue the tradition, and unite the community"* [S7]. In 2018, the dance team represented Hong Kong in the Pan-Pearl River Delta Bay Area and Foshan Autumn

Parade Week, a major annual event in Guangdong, and joined Hong Kong's first thematic ICH exhibition in mainland China in Beijing, featuring 20 local ICH items.

Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance team commander Chan also noted that after the dance joined the national list, Liu continued to collect historical documents and carry out in-depth interviews with Tai Hang community members related to the dance. Based on research by Liu in 2015, the dance team successfully applied for a government grant to revitalize a neighborhood historic building into the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Heritage Centre [S5]. In 2019, the dance was made a Remarkable Example of good safeguarding practice by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism [HK Gov PR].

(d) Cultural and education impact: building appreciation of local cultural heritage

First-hand audio-visual and written data collected by Liu and his survey team have become “*the foundational materials for establishing the online Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage Database that is open and freely accessible to the public*”, ICH Office Curator Chau stated [S3]. Fan Sam-kee, chairman of the Joint Association of Traditional Dragon Boat in Tai O, noted in testimony Liu has written brochures since 2012 about the Tai O Dragon Boat Water Parade “*for the public to better understand the social and cultural significance of the parade and the importance of conservation work*” [S8]. Media interviews with Liu have brought wider dissemination of the importance of ICH in Hong Kong [e.g. S9, S10]. Liu also lectures annually at the ICH Centre in Sam Tung Uk Museum, established in 2016 to “enhance public understanding and awareness of ICH” [2017 Legislative Council paper]. The Museum's rising attendance – from 107,000 in 2016/17 to 116,000 in 2018/19 – is indicative of growing interest in ICH in Hong Kong that Liu has influenced and promoted.

Between 2012 and 2019 the South China Research Center received HK\$718,350 from the Hong Kong Jockey Club to fund its activities in the Tai O Traditional Dragon Boat Parade and a Heritage Education Program. This supported five field trips per year to Tai O for a total of 150 secondary students to understand ICH and local society; an annual field trip and training workshop for 25 secondary school teachers; field tours for 150 visitors during the Dragon Boat Water Parade; and annual publication of 7,000 booklets introducing the Dragon Boat Water Parade and local history.

5. Sources to Corroborate the Impact

[S1] “The Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory of Hong Kong,” Intangible Cultural Heritage Office, Leisure and Cultural Service Department, Hong Kong SAR Government http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/ICHO/en_US/web/icho/the_first_intangible_cultural_heritage_inventory_of_hong_kong.html.

[S2] Denise Tsang, Jonny Tam, and Olga Wong, “The 480 Things that Represent Hong Kong's Culture: List Unveiled After Seven Years' Work”, *South China Morning Post*, 17.06.2014.

[S3] Testimonial: Chau Hing-wah, Curator of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Office, 29.03. 2019.

[S4] Testimonial: Bernadette Linn, Permanent Secretary for Development (Planning & Lands) and Chairman of the Town Planning Board, 07.03.2019.

[S5] Testimonial: Chan Tak-fai, Commander of the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance and Director of the Tai Hang Residents' Welfare Association, 25.03, 2019.

[S6] Testimonial: KM Yeung, Head, Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark of China, 18.03.2019.

[S7] Testimonial: Lau Kam-tong, Chairman of the Joint Association of Traditional Hakka Unicorn in Sai Kung and Hang Hau, Hong Kong, 12.03.2019.

[S8] Testimonial by Fan Sam Kee, Chairman of the Joint Association of Traditional Dragon Boat in Tai O, Hong Kong, 20.03.2019.

[S9] “Intangible Cultural Heritage Connects Local Society: Liu Hopes Sense of Community Fosters Social Relationships” (非遺繫情最本土 社區人愛社區事 廖迪生盼育「社區感」互助觀解問題 癥結勿糾纏定義) *Wen Wei Po*, A05 (Local News), May 30, 2016.

[S10] “An Anthropologist in Humanities at HKUST Helps Turn Tai O Water Parade into National Heritage, and Lead Students to Conserve Tradition” (科大人文學人類學者 助大澳遊涌申遺 領學生保育傳統) *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 26 July 2017.