


## Preserve Intangible Cultural Heritage to Continue the Sense of Belonging of Society

An interview with  
Professor Liu Tik-sang

Member of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee, and Director of South China Research Center, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology



Speaking of Hong Kong traditional culture, intangible cultural heritage is the first concept coming to mind - a concept that may make you immediately think of Professor Liu Tik-sang. His research topics - Tai O dragon boat water parade and Tai Hang fire dragon dance - are inscribed onto the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Liu also helps decide whether to inscribe particular items onto Hong Kong's intangible cultural heritage list, as he is a member of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee.

## Bonding with Intangible Cultural Heritage for 11 Years

Liu was born in Tai O, a small community with lots of traditions and kind people. He has been engaging in field research in Tai O since early 1980s, when he began his anthropology studies. As an expert of this aspect, Liu was invited in 2009 to help inscribe items onto the national intangible cultural heritage list. Those items include the dragon boat water parade in Tai O and fire dragon dance in Tai Hang. He said, “It is providential. I started preservation of intangible cultural heritage owing to my local society research.”

Liu smiled when talking about his work in preserving local traditions, “After engaging in related research for so many years, I am delighted that the traditions originally belonged to the grassroots are finally highlighted. These traditions were omitted by people before, but now the locals would say, ‘this is our traditions which we are proud of’ .”



Provided by interviewee



## 3 Reasons for Preserving the Traditions

Liu said there are at least three reasons why it is essential to preserve cultural heritage, and the first is global trend. “The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) approved The World Heritage Convention in 1970s, appealing to the world to preserve the precious natural and cultural heritage just because they are immensely valuable to human.” The intangible cultural heritage gradually attracted public’s attention until the UNESCO approved another convention in 2003. “Everyone should help protect the endangered local traditions. These traditions are closely associated with society, and they can build rapport between people, it would be a huge loss for us if such traditions vanished.”

The second reason of heritage preservation is about

the country’s policies. China approved the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004, and Hong Kong needs to bear the responsibility of heritage preservation too. “One of the obligations of a contracting state is to compile an intangible cultural heritage and representative list. Being a special administrative region, Hong Kong also needs to own its list,” Liu explained. In 2006, Cantonese opera and herbal tea were selected to the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Together with the eight items picked in 2011 and 2014 respectively, Hong Kong has 10 national intangible cultural heritages (Cantonese opera, herbal tea, Cheung Chau Jiao Festival, Tai O dragon boat parade, Mid-Autumn Festival - the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance, Yu Lan Festival of the Hong Kong Chiu Chow community, Hakka Unicorn Dance in Hang Hau in Sai Kung, Wong Tai Sin belief and customs, Quanzhen Temples Taoist ritual music and the arts of the Guqin (the craft of Qin making), in which Cantonese Opera is also a world intangible cultural heritage item.

The above two reasons are external factors, whereas the third one is internal. Since Hong Kong's handover in 1997, people here have been seeking their identity, and begin to talk about cultural heritage preservation. "Through preserving the historical building and traditional culture, we attempt to find something relate to ourselves." Liu further explained, "Plenty of regional traditional cultures was ruined by hundred years of political movements in mainland. Fortunately, Hong Kong is not affected owing to the colonial status at that time. This somehow helps sustain some vanished cultures here. Items on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hong Kong has undergone such historical process." This tells the importance of preserving traditional culture in Hong Kong.

### “My mum is the best”

It is essential to set the target before starting preservation work. Hence, compiling an intangible cultural heritage list is the first mission for the contracting state. Hong Kong as a special administrative region also needs its list.

In 2009, Liu and the South China Research Center he led conducted researches on intangible cultural heritage in Hong Kong, which involved 800 cases. After that, the team submitted the result to the Intangible Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee for discussion and approval. In 2014, a list with a total of 480 items was compiled after public consultation.

Three years later, the Committee recommended 10 items in the list (Nanyin / Southern tunes, Spring and Autumn Ancestral Worship of Clans, Tin Hau Festival in Hong Kong, Mid-Autumn Festival - the Pok Fu Lam fire dragon dance, Taoist ritual tradition of the Zhengyi School, Sek Pun (Basin Feast), Hong Kong-style milk tea making technique, paper crafting technique, sewing techniques of Hong Kong-style Cheongsam and Kwan Kwa wedding costume, bamboo theatre building technique). Together with the 10 items previously selected to the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, these 20 items formed Hong Kong's Representative List.

The government launched a three-month public consultation when compiling the Representative List and received over 200 opinions. When asked about the representation of the items, Liu replied, "We have a standard of selecting the item, for instance whether it embodies local traditional culture, is transmitted from generation and generation, and provides communities or groups with a sense of identity and continuity. However, it is unavoidable that the process would be affected by 'stereotype' and the decision becomes subjective." He joked, "It is like 'The Best Mother Competition' - everyone would say 'my mum is the best'." Yet, the stalemate must be resolved by procedures and selection criteria, deciding which item shall be selected.



Provided by interviewee

## Cultivate Initiative of the Next Generation



*Provided by interviewee*

### Local politics is the most challenging part to handle

Liu indicated it is not plain sailing in preserving intangible cultural heritage. The most difficult part is to deal with local politics, “Somebody may think that the greatest challenge is lacking money and talents. It is not easy to tackle such issues, still, these are not the biggest problem but reaching a consensus. It complicates the preservation work.” In short, problems occur when different schools claiming they are the orthodoxy for a particular heritage item.

He took the dragon boat water parade in Tai O as an example, “Three fishermen associations would organise the parade separately in the past. When it comes to preserving the water parade, they need to collaborate and set up common rules.” It is hard to reach consensus as each stakeholder has different point of view and a long history of its own practice.

“It can only be solved by mutual understanding among the stakeholders themselves. We cannot intervene.” Liu said frustratingly.

Local politics may make it harder to preserve the cultural heritage, but Liu said the biggest challenge is one’s attitude. “Hong Kong is a relatively wealthy society. It is not difficult in spending money to maintain some traditions. Such act may be efficient but it is just superficial. For example, it is not that difficult to find the best racers outside Tai O to row the the dragon boats. However, the hundred-year ritual of Tai O water parade would be nothing different from the ordinary dragon boat events for the racers. It turns out to be a show without the participation of the community.”

Liu further elaborated that activities about intangible cultural heritage or traditions can only be preserved and become regular because of their close association with society. They can bring a sense of acceptance and belonging to locals. “If the activities are performed by outsiders, locals will still have a sense of alienation.” He considered “attitude” as the most significant element. “How to make heirs, especially the youths realise ‘these are our traditions and have to be preserved by us’, is the key to effective preservation.” However, it takes time to cultivate this sort of initiative.

Dr Sam Chan Chak-lui, the Cantonese opera artist told during her interview with us that human is the main carrier of cultural heritage. Liu agreed, “It cannot be done by just learning the singing techniques through cassette tapes, or imitating the gestures and movement in DVDs. A genuine inherit must be able to depict how the master taught and thus involve sentiment. That is the reason why people would treasure and preserve it at all costs.”

After all, cultural heritage is not just a building or scenery. It is also not a sole activity or knowledge. Cultural heritage should be a carrier among people, and between people and the society. It is a part of people’s life, thereby worth being cherished and preserved by us.

## Epilogue

The interview was conducted in Professor Liu's workplace, School of Humanities and Social Science of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. We felt the kindness of people from Tai O even we were not there. For instance, Professor Liu prepared a few commemoration publications for us when he learnt that we were interested in talking about the dragon boat water parade. During the interview, he searched for the extension socket himself when our photographer needed it. He also accompanied with us to the school gate and said goodbye to us after we got onto the bus.



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Monument preservation in Hong Kong is not something new to us. It has a half-century history, starting from the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance (Chapter 53) formulated in 1976. To date, Hong Kong has 126 declared monuments and more than 1,400 historical buildings. On the contrary, the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (or ICH in short) in Hong Kong has a shorter history. It started in 2008, after the establishment of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee. Let us examine the achievement of ICH preservation over these years.

## The Ultimate Goal of Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation

### Survey: over 50% people not familiar with ICH

Culture is defined by people. So, how Hong Kong people think of local ICH? It cannot be answered easily as we lack survey on ICH. In a 2017 telephone survey which interviewed 1,109 people, 71% of the respondents have heard of the term “intangible cultural heritage”, while 57% said they were not familiar with it. A year after, a political party interviewed 611 youths between 18 to 35 years old who have heard of ICH. 26.1% of those interviewed did not know herbal tea is on the list of ICH, besides 69.1% think that the government did not put enough effort on promotion of ICH.

In November 2020, we conducted an online questionnaire survey to investigate citizens’ familiarity with ICH and received 497 valid replies. We asked the respondents to identify 10 items on the ICH representative list out of 20 choices but it turned out that most of the respondents could only identify four to six items correctly. It is interesting to note that the items that many respondents selected, such as neon signs (56.3%), Suzhou numerals (also known as hua-ma) (42.7%) (Figure 1) and so forth, are not classified as ICH. In contrast, few people correctly identified the Taoist ritual tradition of the Zhengyi School (23%) and the arts of the Guqin (31.3%). It reveals that the difference between citizens’ impression on ICH and the actual answer. (see table 1)

90.7%

Not aware of public consultation on ICH items

97.8%

Agree to reveal the ratio of “public opinion” on recommended items

70.2%

Believe economic development and culture preservation complement each other

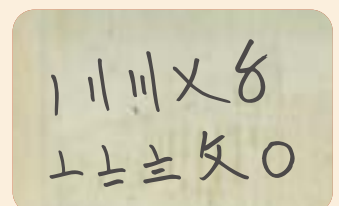


Figure 1

Note: To understand citizens’ familiarity and attitude towards preservation of ICH, we conducted an online questionnaire survey between 3rd and 17th November 2020 and received 497 valid replies, in which 86.5% of respondents were born in Hong Kong, and 96.6% of them received primary and secondary education here.

## Citizens Familiarity towards ICH of HK

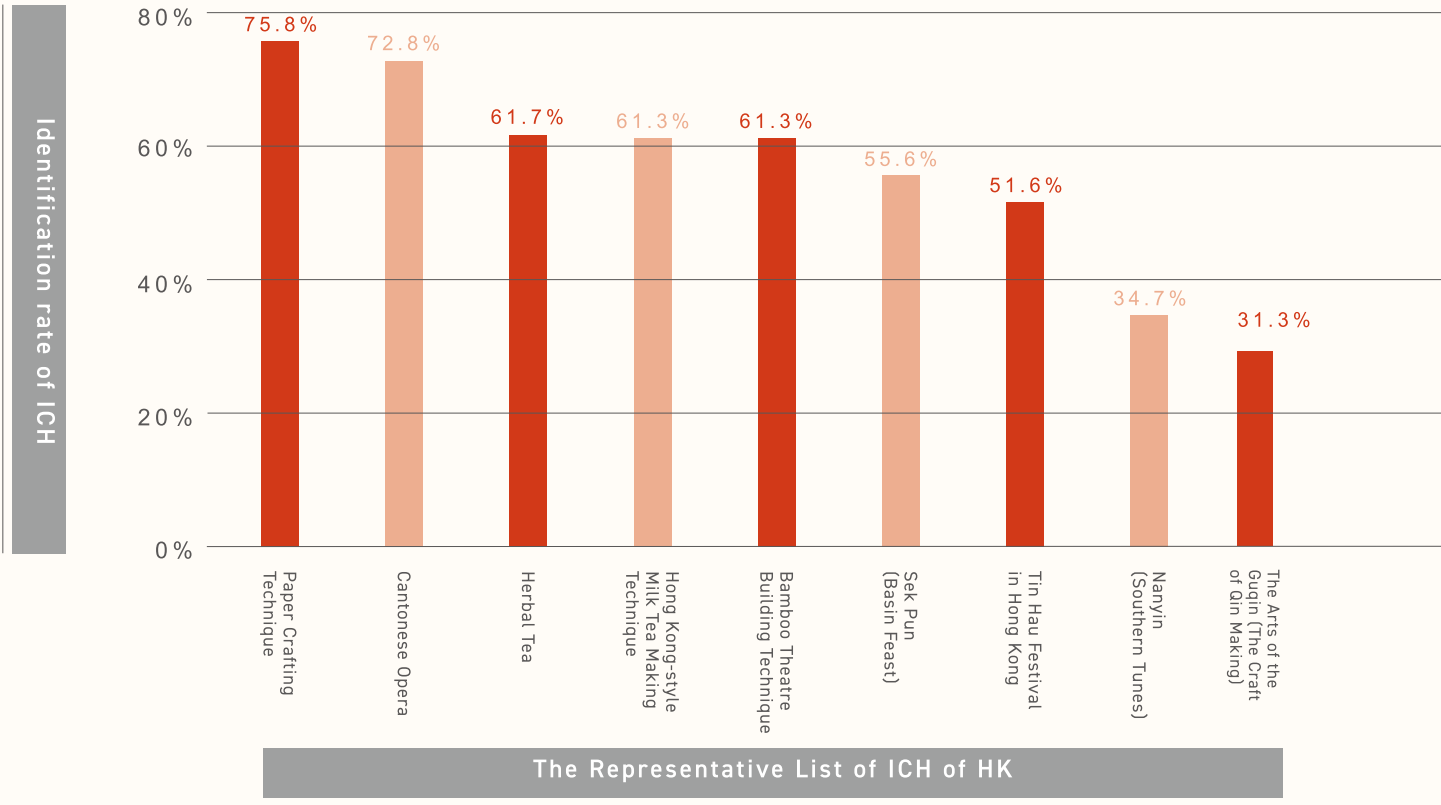


table 1 : Identification rate of ICH

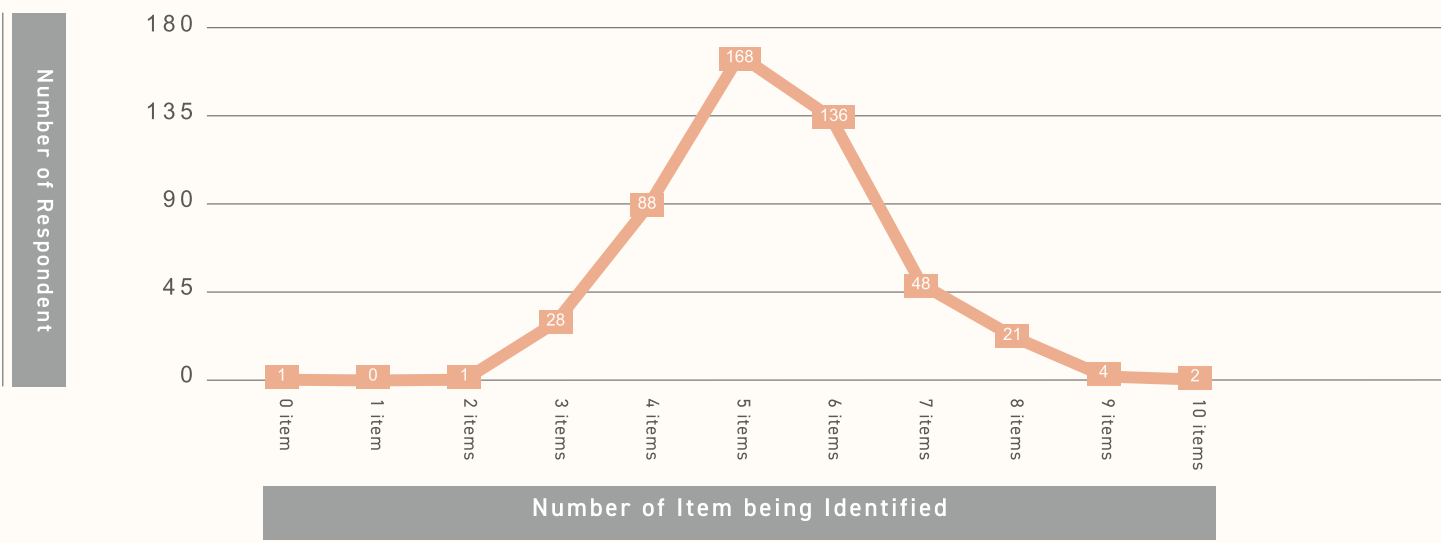


table 2 : Identification of ICH of HK

## Selection of ICH:

# Hong Kong-style café culture as an example

Hong Kong has 480 ICH items thus far. Perhaps you would argue that it is unavoidable to wrongly identify the items of ICH as the list is too long. However, we need to ask the goal of ICH preservation. Do we want to keep a historical item or a culture with high acceptance? Here, we try to explore the question with Hong Kong style cafe culture as an example.

In 2004, Radio Television Hong Kong held a vote on “10 Designs that Representing Hong Kong”. Among the 3,403 voters, 56% picked Hong Kong-style café as their first choice. Three years later, a legislative councillor proposed a motion to inscribe Hong Kong-style café culture as an ICH item. However, the government vetoed the motion after listening to expert’s advice. It said, “The task force of the research centre considered that Hong Kong-style café culture as a kind of catering business. Due to the discrepancy in content, it is hard to come up with an episteme”.

In 2015, a political party persisted to propose inscribing Hong Kong-style café culture onto the list. Unfortunately, it is still yet approved. At the same time, the technique of preparing four types of food commonly found in Hong Kong-style café have already enrolled in the list, including Hong Kong-style milk tea, coffee milk-tea (Yin-yang), egg tart together with pineapple bun. Hong Kong-style milk tea is even chosen as one of the items on Hong Kong’s ICH representative list.



## Raising Sense of Identity VS Existing Episteme

Is the expert's comment right? Professor Selina Chan Ching of Department of Sociology at Hong Kong Shue Yan University pointed out that Hong Kong-style café is part of the local unique culture. Its hybridity, including food combination (like coffee milk-tea and iced Ribena with lemon), eating habit (Western-style meals must begin with starter, followed by main dish and dessert. In contrast, Hong Kong-style café pursues efficiency. Chefs or bartenders finish cooking the meal as quickly as possible and serve their customers), interior decoration (apart from Chinese-style round tables, there are also booth seating and even a bar), style of placing an order (using simplified and traditional Chinese mixed with English), and flexible management (Hong Kong-style café is generally running independently except for small number of chain stores). The above elements represent the unique culture of Hong Kong.

Professor Chan explained that Hong Kong-style café culture can reflect locals' daily life, besides reflecting the political, economic and social development. She illustrated with Hong Kong-style milk tea, a drink originated from cafés under British colonial administration, and "localised" and became popular in Hong Kong.

She considered this kind of mingling culture as embodying Hong Kong people's values which emphasises efficiency, diversity, flexibility and choices. It also emphasises the special cultural identity of Hong Kong people.

Hong Kong-style café culture is regarded as "just a catering business that hard to come up with an episteme". Therefore, it is not easy to inscribe it as an ICH item. However, Washoku - traditional food culture for Japanese, has already been designated as UNESCO ICH in 2013. It is because it reflects how Japanese respect the nature, such as keeping the ingredients' freshness and original taste, focusing on variety and balanced diet. All these are the food-related custom in Japan.

Hong Kong-style café and Washoku can both reflect local culture. So, why the former cannot be inscribed onto the world's ICH list as Washoku? Do we only need an existing episteme on the ICH list for easy management? Do we want to keep cultural heritage that give a sense of identity among citizens?

# Promotion: the Bottom-up Approach

Due to soaring housing demand, many non-indigenous inhabitants (usually distinguished by bearing different surnames to the clan) or urbanites moved to the walled villages (in Chinese wai), and it is challenging to ask these residents to devote themselves into or inherit the ICH events of the clan. The ICH Office of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, which is set up in 2015, has held a few exhibitions, talks and fun day each year. Nevertheless, it is a matter of debate for the effectiveness of promotion. Referring to the survey mentioned above, nearly 70% of youths interviewed considered the government did not put enough effort on promotion.

The government has been trying the bottom-up approach in recent years, aiming to engage community's participation in ICH promotion through the Partnership Projects and Community-driven Projects. Examples include the "Picture Book Series" on ICH for primary students launched in July 2020; "Survey on ICH of Different Groups in Hong Kong" to understand Hong Kong ethnic minorities' opinions towards ICH; "ICH for All" to organise activities for people with special educational needs and disabilities. Tertiary education institutes, charities and non-profit-making organisations are invited to apply for launching such activities. The bottom-up approach s combines superiority of different groups and create a better result in promotion than the top down approach. However, the effectiveness still awaits examination.

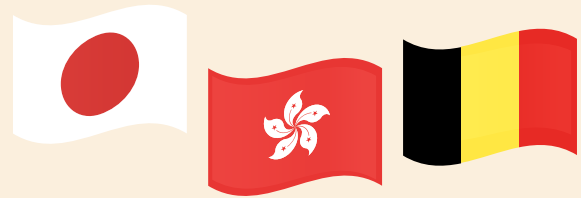
## Learn from Other Countries in Preserving ICH

Media veteran Mr Cho Man-wai believed that Hong Kong can learn from Japan or Europe in promotion by classifying those ICHs as national games, arts or treasures. Besides, ancient techniques like goldsmithing, watchmaking and Japanese sachet making are also regarded as national pride. Such approach can attract the attention of both citizens and tourists, and encourage the youth to devote themselves into inheriting those wonderful handicrafts.

Let us take a look into the ways of ICH preservation (clothing, food culture, performing arts) in Hong Kong, Japan and Belgium. (see table 3)

Japan and Belgium are enthusiastic in raising the social status of the ICH items. For instance, officials would become promotion ambassadors, and artisans with extraordinary skills would be given compliments like a title of “national treasure” along with pecuniary aid. Also, those industries would maintain professionalism and reputation through trademarks.

In Hong Kong, there is an annual KamCha (which means “excellent milk tea”) competition in preserving Hong Kong-style milk tea making technique. The winner is regarded as “King of KamCha” of the year. However, there are also six to seven runners-up each year, together with a group of awardees of KamYin-yang (or “excellent coffee



milk tea”) competition. It is difficult for the public to memorise the winners’ names, and there is no post-event promotion to help boost the popularity of Hong Kong-style milk tea. The “King of KamCha” apparently vanishes after the competition, and the title cannot be compared to the status of “national treasure” in Japan. Despite the contest has been held for 12 years thus far, Hong Kong-style milk tea does not seem to be held in high regard.

Moreover, Japan would protect ICH by legislation, such as setting up a “geisha” register to prohibit tourists’ inappropriate behaviour towards them, which is a total different approach to Hong Kong. For subsidies, Hong Kong supports promotion of Cantonese opera by the Cantonese Opera Development Fund established in 2005. The Community-driven Projects under the ICH Funding Scheme also allows ICH heirs to apply for subsidies for promotion. However, some heirs are relying upon their skills to make a living. Cheongsam and Kwan Kwa wedding costume making is an example. As Mr Kan Hon-wing, the Cheongsam production master said, “Price level of Hong Kong keeps increasing. After deducting the necessary expenditure, I can only earn very little (from Cheongsam making).” If ICH heirs are hard to survive on their skills, how can they manage to organise big scale promotional events for the society?

	Clothing		Performing Arts		Food Culture	
	Kimono (Kyoto)	Hong Kong-style Cheongsam and Kwan Kwa wedding costume	"Geisha" performance	Cantonese opera	Belgium beer brewing	Hong Kong-style milk tea making
Time of start	14th century	Early 20th century	17th century	Mid-16th century	17th century	Mid-20th century
Ways to raise social status of the item	The mayor of Kyoto wears kimono every day as the promotion ambassador	-	Famous "geisha" would be regarded as "national treasure of talent"	-	The Union of Belgian Breweries introduced trademark for certified Belgian Abbey Beer	Winner of the KamCha competition would be regarded as "King of KamCha"
	Attendees of concerts and parties must wear kimonos					
Legal protection	-	-	Establish a registration system	-	No beer purity laws (limiting the ingredients in beer) that allows people to brew beer themselves. There are about 1,500 types of beer produced thereby. It becomes a distinguishing feature of Belgian beer.	-
			Prohibit tourists taking photos on "geisha" on the street without consent by law			
Subsidies	-	Subsidised by government	Subsidise "national treasure of talent" each year on inheriting the culture and education	Some performances and related research funded by the Cantonese Opera Development Fund	-	ICH Funding Scheme
		Collaboration between government and tertiary education institutes, inviting masters of traditional handicrafts to teach youths		Organise Cantonese opera workshops for secondary and primary students		Community organisations provide courses to transfer the skill
Professional training	-		-	Community Cantonese opera classes for children	Breweries, universities and public training centres organise courses respectively to transfer the skills	
Public promotion	Discounts for assigned taxi rides for passengers wearing kimono				Selling beer in music festivals and events, book fairs and other big-scale events	Promote the techniques through International KamCha Competition that allows members of the industry to learn from each other
	Free admission for people wearing kimono at some tourist spots	Hong Kong Post invited students from tertiary education institutes to assist with the design of stamps with the theme Cheongsam	Discounts for tourists to participate in geisha cultural experience	Hold "Cantonese Opera Day" in November each year as a way of promotion	Numerous beer festivals each year, including Zythos Beer Festival in April, and Brussels Beer Festival in September	
	Designate the first working day of the new year as "Kimono Day"				Around 30 beer museums in the country	Community organisations undertake promotion events

## Education for Inheriting ICH

According to the Eurobarometer survey in 2017, 88% Europeans agreed to put the European cultural heritage in the school syllabus to teach children the related history and culture.

Indeed, education is significant in pushing the next generation to engage in ICH preservation. Modules like “Hong Kong Today”, “Identity and Sense of Identity” and “Modern China” of the Liberal Studies syllabus for secondary schools guide students to reflect on self-identity, rapport with the community, as well as to know more about the traditional cultures of different communities, embrace and appreciate different cultures. These help the ICH promotion in long-term.

Recently, some groups and organisations are undertaking ICH promotion for primary and secondary students. For instance, Lingnan University and The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts designed training courses on ICH for secondary students. The students can acquire the knowledge of heritage's history, learn the skills from masters of traditional handicrafts and instructors through workshops, and also understand the theories and skills of creative arts.

Another example is The Conservancy Association, a green group that has been promoting cultural preservation to students and the community by collecting oral history, field studies, workshops, exhibitions, talks and so forth. They published a comic guidebook and produced a teaching kit about ICH in recent years, which introduce ICH items to primary and secondary students in an interesting way.

For younger or pre-primary children, the government or organisations can consider providing more cultural experience activities to cultivate their interest in different cultures and broaden their horizon. For instance, the government can organise a Cultural Experience Week annually for children to catch a glimpse of ICH (like tasting traditional snacks or making traditional handicrafts). Besides, museums can offer guided tours on ICH for kids ICH. These are the best approaches to inherit our culture.

## Conclusion

“A city without a long history can form its uniqueness through culture establishment and citizens' collective memories. Hong Kong is a city like that.” urban planner Ms Faith Ng Wing-chi said.

Among the 480 Hong Kong ICH items, how many of them can recall the collective memories of people here? It is thought-provoking. We expect the government and citizens would spend more time and be patient in deciding which ICHs worth being preserved for keeping the unique culture of the city.

For government, bottom-up approach and collaboration with different groups and organisations may be a good choice in preserving and inheriting ICH. However, apart from approving funding, it should also have a long-term development strategy to ensure the heirs' livelihood. Such practice would be far more effective than having more cultural tours or handicraft courses.

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