

# From village tradition to Hong Kong's intangible cultural heritage: heritagisation of Pok Fu Lam Village's Fire Dragon Dance

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# From village tradition to Hong Kong's intangible cultural heritage: heritagisation of Pok Fu Lam Village's Fire Dragon Dance

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the heritagisation process of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance in Hong Kong, tracing its transformation from a village tradition to a recognised intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Through fieldwork and historical analysis, the study explores how the Fire Dragon Dance has evolved in response to urbanisation threats, government policies and the ICH designation. The research highlights how local stakeholders have strategically leveraged the ICH concept to revitalise and maintain their community traditions, while also adapting the practice to meet broader societal expectations. The paper

argues that this process involves negotiation and compromise, resulting in a de-villagisation and performatisation of the dance. By expanding beyond its original community and embracing new performance contexts, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance has successfully transformed into a shared cultural resource for Hong Kong, demonstrating the dynamic nature of ICH in urban settings.

## Keywords

De-villagisation, Heritagisation, Performatisation, Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance, Urban

## Introduction

In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter 'UNESCO Convention'), marking a significant shift in global cultural preservation efforts. China, the sixth country to ratify the Convention in 2004, has since become a leader in intangible cultural heritage recognition, boasting 43 UNESCO-recognised items, including one transnational item shared with Mongolia (Wu 2020) and another with Malaysia (Neo and Ngo 2024). As a Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong (hereafter 'HKSAR') aligned with these policies, confirming the Convention's applicability in 2004. This paper examines how the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance, a tradition from Hong Kong's largest squatter village, has been transformed through this process of heritagisation. By tracing its journey from a village custom to a recognised ICH element, we explore the dynamic interplay between local traditions, government policies and global heritage discourses in an urban Asian context.

HKSAR Leisure and Cultural Services Department and its subsidiary the Hong Kong Heritage Museum began implementing relevant safeguarding measures. In March 2006, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit was established to carry out research, documentation, transmission, education and promotion work (Chau 2019). From October 2006, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology was commissioned multiple times to investigate various ICH elements and was later entrusted with compiling the Hong Kong ICH Inventory.

The inventory, officially announced in 2014, included 480 ICH items, with the Fire Dragon Dance from Pok Fu Lam Village, the largest squatter village on Hong Kong Island, being one of them. Concurrently, in response to China's implementation of a four-level national ICH representative list system from the national to the county level in March 2005, Hong Kong, as a Special Administrative Region, also needed to create its own representative list. Thus, through the ICH Advisory Committee established in 2008, and with

input from relevant university scholars or social figures (usually pro-China politicians or corporate executives), Hong Kong passed its first ICH Representative List in 2017. In addition to eight national-level ICH items directly selected in a top-down manner before 2017, the list also included 12 Hong Kong ICH representative items, with the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance (薄扶林舞火龍) being one of them.

Society's understanding of ICH often focuses on how to inherit a community's traditional culture and society. However, ICH is not a fixed form. The UNESCO Convention has always emphasised the spirit of re-creation, and the Hong Kong social practices and rituals selected as ICH have undergone varying degrees of re-creation. Nevertheless, no item has benefited from ICH policies like the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance, causing the entire traditional activity to undergo a process of heritagisation, transforming it into a shared cultural resource for Hong Kong.

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach in examining the heritagisation process of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance. Primary data was collected through participant observation during the 2023 Fire Dragon Dance event and through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. These stakeholders included Mr. Siu Kwan-lun, the director of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Association, five long-term villagers involved in the tradition, three non-village participants who had recently joined the dance team, and representatives from two non-government organisations (NGOs) that organised workshops for people with disabilities. These first-hand accounts were supplemented by archival research, analysis of historical documents, media reports and government records related to the Fire Dragon Dance and ICH policies in Hong Kong. This multifaceted approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the dance's transformation from a village tradition to a recognised ICH element, situating it within broader debates about heritage preservation in urban contexts.

## Overview of ICH Studies in Hong Kong

The study of ICH in Hong Kong intersects with several key themes in contemporary heritage studies: the impact of urbanisation 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 existing literature through these lenses, highlighting the evolving understanding of ICH in Hong Kong's unique cultural landscape.

Hong Kong's traditional festival customs can be traced back to documented records from the Qing Dynasty. Anthropological fieldwork indicates that many festival activities in the New Territories villages (see Watson and Watson 2005; Choi and Wei 2014), such as the Taiping Qingjiao (太平清醮 Jiao Festival of Peace and Purity) and the Lighting of Lanterns (點燈), have a history of over a hundred years. However, the discourse and institutional framework of Hong Kong's ICH policy have a history of less than 20 years and are still being continuously shaped (Chau 2019) Even in international discussions, relevant debates only began around 1989 (Aikawa-Faure 2009).

Many anthropologists, sociologists and historians in Hong Kong have shown considerable interest in the creation of discourse concepts and their impact on cultural traditions (Choi 1990; Li 2018; Wang 2021). More abundant research findings are published in ethnographic reports written in Chinese or in specialist papers that treat ICH as an academic topic in religious and anthropological studies. In the English-speaking academic community, notable references include the special volume edited by Khun and Liu (2016) and the conference papers collection compiled by Liu (2011). The former specifically examines the evolution of ICH traditions in fishing communities such as Hong Kong's Tai O and Cheung Chau, while the latter integrates several East Asian case studies to investigate the impact of introducing the ICH concept on Hong Kong's cultural traditions.

The Hungry Ghost Festival (or Yulan Festival) represents another significant research area in Hong Kong's ICH studies. Selina Chan's (2018, 2019, 2023; Chen 2015) ongoing sociological research demonstrates how the Chiu Chow community's festival gained national-level ICH recognition, leading to significant changes in community cohesion and social perceptions. Similarly, Lü's (2018) research directly examines the ICH application process, exploring how Chiu Chow groups reinterpret ethnic traditions through ICH and the Hungry Ghost Culture Festival. The discussion of food culture in Hong Kong's ICH context reveals the revival and transformation of local traditional cuisine, as seen in Sidney Cheung's (2013) research. The invention of the Poon Choi tradition is particularly notable. While commonly believed to be a

'traditional' Hong Kong food culture, Liu (2021), Smart (2006), Chan (2007) and Watson (2007) have argued that this perception was only invented after the 1997 handover. During the British colonial period, Poon Choi was considered food of Chinese ethnic minorities in New Territories villages. Chan further elaborated how Poon Choi became a popular dish in urban family and community gatherings. The introduction of the ICH concept in Hong Kong has prompted a reassessment of cultural elements that have long been present in the current environment, particularly regarding their shifting societal status.

Since the 2000s, the English-speaking academic community has advocated for Critical Heritage Studies, arguing that heritage studies concern the present, not the past. In heritage research, authenticity is no longer a primary focus. Instead, scholars have shifted to examining how the value and meaning of heritage result from interactions between various actors (government, experts, or ICH communities) within power relations. Laurajane Smith, a key figure in Critical Heritage Studies, advocates that 'heritage' is not a thing – not a site, building or other material object – but a cultural process (Smith 2006), posing a significant challenge to the original heritage research paradigm.

In Hong Kong's unique cultural space, the recent promotion of ICH is often interpreted as a continuation of national traditions and a connection between Hong Kong society and mainland China (Luo 2024). The government consciously uses Hong Kong's history and culture to integrate with the development of the Chinese nation, legitimising the integration of Hong Kong and China to cultivate residents' sense of obligation and belonging (Ho and Law 2023). In China's ICH framework, Liu addressed how local traditions like the Hakka Unicorn Dance gain legitimacy and resources for revitalisation not through an equal exchange with the 'great tradition' but through strategic realignment with official Chinese civilisation narratives, demonstrating how marginalised practices can be reincorporated into national culture by communities that deliberately emphasise their Chinese cultural authenticity and values.

While this pattern of strategic realignment has been observed across various ICH traditions, its manifestation in specific cases requires detailed examination – particularly in traditions that have received less scholarly attention. The Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance presents such a case

study. Research on this tradition remains notably scarce within the broader field of Hong Kong's ICH studies. Apart from a government-commissioned monograph, scholarly attention has focused primarily on Pok Fu Lam's built heritage or general conservation approaches, exemplified by Chen's (2024) analysis of global heritage discourse flows within the village context. The monograph on the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance by Zhong and Guo (2023), developed as part of the Hong Kong ICH Office's initiative to document representative works, represents the first comprehensive documentation of this tradition.

While the authors meticulously detail the dance's organisation, craftsmanship and ritual processes, their perspective emphasises historical documentation rather than critical analysis of the tradition's transformation. The present study addresses this gap by examining the twin processes of de-villagisation and performatisation that have fundamentally reshaped the Fire Dragon Dance in its journey from local ritual to recognised heritage.

## Development of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance before the formation of the ICH concept

The history of Pok Fu Lam Village can be traced back to the mid-Qing Dynasty. The Gazette of the Xin'an County during the Jiaqing reign documented the existence of various villages on Hong Kong Island, including Pok Fu Lam. While few structures over a hundred years old remain in the village, there is a Lee-Ling Fairy Tower that was rebuilt in 1916. This spiritual tower is an important landmark in the Fire Dragon Dance parade route through the village.



**Figure 1**  
Aerial photographs of Pok Fu Lam Village in the 1940s.  
Source: Kwong Chi Man's Digital Project on Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong.

The villagers' renewed emphasis on the Fire Dragon Dance relates to the existential threat facing Pok Fu Lam Village. The tradition was banned by the government in the 1970s and 1980s because villagers viewed it not as a unifying festival element but as a tool for competition and collecting incense money, similar to the Lion Dance. However, after its revival in 1987, the practice transformed into a symbol of village unity and, eventually, into a shared cultural memory of Hong Kong.

The Fire Dragon Dance in Pok Fu Lam was traditionally held during the Mid-Autumn Festival, which falls on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month. Villagers, now also involving individuals from outside the community, meticulously begin constructing the dragon from straw and bamboo a few months before the festival. Pok Fu Lam's dragon is slightly smaller than the national ICH-designated Tai Hang fire dragon, a modification necessitated by the narrower trail size in Pok Fu Lam. The fire dragon tradition in Pok Fu Lam shares an origin story almost identical to that of Tai Hang. It reportedly arose because of an epidemic outbreak in the area, with villagers creating a fire dragon filled with incense to drive away the disease. The history has been traced back approximately 100 years, with the current inherited narrative indicating that various epidemics occurred in the village in the 19th century and the ritual has been held continuously since then.

The Fire Dragon Dance has not always been a highly valued folk tradition, occasionally being influenced by the social, political and cultural needs of the moment. In 1910, Huazi Ribao (1910) described the Fire Dragon Dance as a backward and superstitious custom not accepted by the colonial government. At that time, the villagers of Tai Hang

Village had caused fights due to the Fire Dragon Dance and were subsequently banned, requiring approval from the District Officer to continue holding the event. In 1940, Huazi Ribao (1940) referred to the Fire Dragon Dance as a boring act that did not help address the cholera epidemic of the time. These perspectives reflect that Hong Kong society did not universally regard the Fire Dragon Dance as a major folk tradition worthy of preservation.

However, folk communities attached great importance to the Fire Dragon Dance, often using it as part of festive parades. For example, in 1937, residents of Shau Kei Wan held an epidemic prevention parade during the Tam Kung's Birthday celebration, performing the Fire Dragon Dance (*Gongshang Ribao* 1937a). That same year, influenced by the anti-Japanese war in Mainland China, Hong Kong citizens launched fundraising activities to support the war effort (*Gongshang Ribao* 1937b). Among them, Tai Hang Village also used the Fire Dragon Dance for fundraising. In 1953, Tai Hang villagers wielded the fire dragon to participate in the coronation parade of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II. Therefore, the fire dragon is not exclusive to any single community and has been used for different social and cultural purposes (Pang 2019). However, the Fire Dragon Dance traditions in Pok Fu Lam Village and Tai Hang have maintained similar and consistent practices over the past few decades.

Although the villagers of Pok Fu Lam Village claim that the Fire Dragon Dance tradition has a history of over a hundred years, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Association was formally established only in 2015, and the traceable oral records date back only to the 1970s and 1980s when it was banned. The development of the Fire Dragon Dance has clearly undergone a process of heritagisation. With the formation of the ICH concept in Hong Kong, this practice, which appears to be a village tradition but is actually a tradition deliberately re-created by local people, has been transformed in response to the changing social needs of the villagers.

In 1998, the HKSAR Government planned to acquire land from Pok Fu Lam Village for the construction of a building department depot. In response, the villagers organised a focus group to negotiate and contest this decision with the government. To showcase the historical value of Pok Fu Lam, one resident presented their ownership deed dating back to the Qing Dynasty (Government Records Service n.d.). Fortunately, the government acknowledged their



**Figure 2**  
Participants performing the dance 'Fire Dragon Returns to the Sea', 2023.  
Source: Author's own collection.

demand and the land acquisition plan was terminated.

In January 2014, the Hong Kong Government released a policy address regarding housing and urban development planning, announcing the relaxation of development restrictions in Pok Fu Lam. Although these restrictions did not directly involve Pok Fu Lam Village itself and mainly addressed the redevelopment of Wah Fu Estate, the announcement raised concerns about potential land resumption within the village. As a result, the villagers launched various cultural conservation efforts, including applying for conservation and revitalisation plans for the dairy farm and dormitory buildings related to the Dairy Farm Company. The Pok Fu Lam Village Cultural Landscape Conservation Group, composed of villagers, successfully listed Pok Fu Lam Village on the World Monuments Watch List in 2013 (Protect 2013; *Pingguo Ribao* 2013). This listing by the World Monuments Fund provides financial or technical support to local partners for site preservation. Simultaneously, the group actively applied for the Fire Dragon Dance to be listed as ICH and promoted various funding applications. In 2016, they successfully obtained support from the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust for the Pok Fu Lam Community Archive Research Project (The Lord Wilson Heritage Trust 2024), which included workshops and seminars related to the craftsmanship of the Fire Dragon Dance.

The villagers began to realise that preserving and promoting local customs and traditions could serve as a compelling argument in negotiating with the government regarding land resumption (Tan 2020). Consequently, the Fire Dragon Dance has received increasing attention from the villagers, which is evident in the organisational changes relating to the parade. Before 2015, the organisation of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance was subordinate to the Pok Fu Lam Welfare Association, and parade arrangements requiring police approval needed to be coordinated through the village's Welfare Association. Since 2015, Mr. Siu, the director of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Association, has single-handedly taken charge of the entire preparation work for the Fire Dragon Dance (Zhong and Guo 2023).

The Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance embodies many concepts valued by the ICH Convention, such as folk craftsmanship (i.e. paper crafting) that sustains human traditions, functions that unite the community, and the wisdom of traditional problem-solving. After being included

in the ICH inventory in 2014, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance was placed in a position similar to provincial-level ICH items in China, being selected as a Hong Kong ICH representative work in 2017. The name of the item was changed from 'Fire Dragon Dance: Pok Fu Lam Village' in the 2014 inventory to 'Mid-Autumn Festival: Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance' in the 2017 representative list, following the naming conventions of the State Council. This suggests that the ICH Office consciously sought to align the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance with the application format of the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance, transforming it from the social practices category of UNESCO to a folk activity category accepted by the State Council.

### **The Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance moves beyond the village**

The transformation of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance from a localised village tradition to a widely recognised cultural practice exemplifies the complex dynamics of heritage-making in urban contexts. This section of the paper examines how the dance has expanded beyond its original community boundaries, exploring three key aspects of this process: its increasing visibility in Hong Kong's cultural landscape, its adaptation to new performance contexts, and its role in negotiating community identity in the face of urbanisation pressures.

Although the Fire Dragon Dance is a longstanding tradition deeply rooted in the Pok Fu Lam Village community, it was banned by the government from being held in the 1970s and 1980s because it had become a profit-making activity. In the early years, the Fire Dragon Dance tradition was seen as a tool for displaying the power of local forces and community organisations, leading to its suspension between 1973 and 1987 (Zhong and Guo 2023). This situation parallels the Cheung Chau Bun Festival. Ma Mu-chi's (2022) research notes that the Bun Festival had certain ties with triad organisations, which provided funding for the bun towers and used the festival as a competition venue to demonstrate their strength. Only after the collapse of the bun towers in 1978 did the government restrict the bun-snatching event, leading to the withdrawal of these organisations. Similarly, after Pok Fu Lam Village's Fire Dragon Dance was revived in 1987, it was held under the auspices of the Welfare Association as an activity to unite the villagers and then, in the 21st century, gradually moved beyond the village community.

In 1997, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance first began

to step out of the community when it became one of the local performance elements in the celebrations for Hong Kong's return to China (*South China Morning Post* 1997). By the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2010, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance had partnered with government tourism promotion activities, becoming a folk tradition that drew wider attention. In 2010, the Southern District Office and District Council sought to attract local, mainland and foreign visitors to the Southern District (Southern District Council 2010). The villagers of Pok Fu Lam applied for District Council funding, collaborating with the Tourism and Cultural Festival. They highlighted the Fire Dragon Dance celebration's centennial, arranging courses in making fire dragons and encouraging citizens to insert incense into the dragon's body, enhancing public interaction (*Dongfang Ribao* 2010).

Since the Fire Dragon Association independently organised the Fire Dragon Dance event in 2015, it has expanded its outreach beyond the community. Mr. Siu collaborated with the Pok Fu Lam Village Cultural Landscape Conservation Limited and in 2016 successfully obtained support from the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust with the theme of 'Pok Fu Lam Village Community Archive Inheritance Cultural Experience Sharing'. This project, primarily supporting community and built heritage conservation, allowed for the dissemination of workshops and stories related to the Fire Dragon Dance craftsmanship to various primary and secondary schools.

The community now recognises the importance of promoting and redefining the significance of their tradition. Director Mr. Siu highlighted how they have leveraged government support from the Intangible Cultural Heritage Funding Scheme and the Home Affairs Department to involve non-residents in crafting the fire dragon. Furthermore, villagers actively invite interested individuals to volunteer and participate in the fire dragon event, by joining either the dance or supporting teams. In an interview in 2022, Mr. Siu said: 'The Fire Dragon Dance is a grand event in Pok Fu Lam Village and one of the traditional cultural activities in the Southern District.' His statement clearly highlighted the 'de-villagisation' characteristic of the Fire Dragon Dance.

The expansion of the Fire Dragon Dance beyond its original village context has generated mixed reactions within the community. Through interviews conducted during this research, I found a generational and residential

divide in the perceptions of these changes. Older villagers, particularly those born and raised in Pok Fu Lam, expressed some concerns about the authenticity of the evolving tradition. As one elder villager stated: 'The dragon used to be just for us, made by us. Now it's becoming like a show for everyone else. Sometimes I worry we're losing what made it special to the village.' Another long-term resident shared similar sentiments: 'When I was young, we didn't invite outsiders to join. It was a village affair. Now it feels different with all these new people coming to participate.'

However, younger villagers and non-village participants view the changes more positively. A young villager who has participated in the dance for over 20 years remarked: 'The tradition would die if we kept it only in the village. By opening it up, we're actually saving it. More people mean more energy and more support for keeping the village itself from disappearing.'

Non-village participants who have joined the dance team in recent years expressed enthusiasm about being part of a cultural tradition. One participant, who lives in Southern District, stated: 'I feel honored to be part of something so important to Hong Kong's heritage. It's not just Pok Fu Lam's dragon anymore – it belongs to all of us who care about preserving these traditions.'

During the 2023 Mid-Autumn Festival, I interviewed several members of the dancing team, including a female participant. They confirmed that many non-villagers were now permitted to join the dance, demonstrating the community's increasing openness. Although the clothing still retains the name of Pok Fu Lam Village, the various rituals not only take place in Pok Fu Lam but also interact with the fire dragons in Wah Fu Estate and Aberdeen, concluding the celebration in Waterfall Bay. These examples clearly illustrate Pok Fu Lam villagers' proactive approach to community education and cultural promotion of the fire dragon dancing tradition. This shift is partly motivated by their desire to preserve the village itself. In a 2017 media interview and in my recent interview, Mr. Siu explicitly stated that the ultimate goal of preserving this cultural heritage is to resist village demolition (*Dongfang Ribao* 2017).

The Aberdeen Fire Dragon Dance, mentioned earlier, demonstrates the tradition's spread beyond Pok Fu Lam. Mr. Ng, the paper-crafting master of the Aberdeen Fire



**Figure 3**  
Parade of Pok Fu Lam's fire dragon in Wah Fu Estate.  
Source: Author's own collection.



**Figure 4**  
The Meet-up of Pok Fu Lam and Aberdeen's fire dragons in Wah Fu Estate.  
Source: Author's own collection.

Dragon Dance, was originally from Pok Fu Lam Village. This master later had more interactions with the community and youth centre in Aberdeen and began to craft another fire dragon there to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival (*Taikungpao* 2023). Additionally, a Fire Dragon Dance event emerged in Ping Che in the Northern District of Hong Kong, with the paper-crafting master also being a resident of Pok Fu Lam Village (*Wenhuibao* 2019). These new dragon dance locations do not have standardised community traditions to unite participation but are viewed as forms of community performance. Nevertheless, the residents of Pok Fu Lam Village and Mr. Siu express pride in witnessing the spread of their traditions to other communities.

### The Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance as a performance

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally transformed the performance of traditional customs in Hong Kong, forcing communities to adapt their practices. Popular traditions like the Guanyin Treasury Opening custom were digitalised, allowing devotees to participate from home. On Po Toi Island, where opera troupes were restricted from performing religious plays at the Jiao Festival during the pandemic, organisers compromised by placing a television playing Cantonese opera on stage (*Xianggang Shangbao* 2021). These adaptations demonstrate efforts to maintain the integrity of community rituals despite public health restrictions.

The pandemic created both challenges and opportunities for the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance. While the physical event was suspended during severe

restrictions in 2020 and 2021, this period of forced inactivity paradoxically increased public interest in local traditions. Mr. Siu explained: 'During the pandemic when people couldn't travel, many Hong Kong people became more interested in local traditions. They wanted to reconnect with their cultural roots after being isolated for so long.'

This renewed interest, combined with the ICH label, provided the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance with an opportunity to gain fresh recognition in post-pandemic Hong Kong society. From the perspectives of cultural tourism promotion and Chinese cultural inheritance, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance has been appropriated by different entities to meet various societal expectations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Association collaborated with Ocean Park, displaying one of the fire dragon heads crafted in Pok Fu Lam Village in the park's Old Hong Kong Street, serving as an element for promoting local cultural tourism in 2022 (*Wenweipo* 2022). Subsequently, in 2023, an exhibition was conducted along with a parade inside the theme park (Ocean Park 2023). Detached from its village-based geographical context, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance has become a shared cultural tradition of Hong Kong, employed to embody broader meanings.

The choice of Ocean Park as a venue is strategically significant. In interviews, Mr. Siu consistently emphasised the social and cultural significance of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance by situating it within the larger community of the Southern District. As the largest recreational space in the Southern District and on Hong Kong Island, Ocean



**Figure 5**  
The fire dragon head crafted for the Ocean Park display, 2022.  
Source: Author's own collection.

Park is an ideal venue for showcasing Hong Kong's traditions to both local and foreign visitors. It is worth noting that Ocean Park is perceived as a locally operated theme park in Hong Kong, with a dedicated area themed on old Hong Kong society – the Old Hong Kong Street – which legitimised the entire performance (Ocean Park 2023).

Similarly, in the Southern District, during the Mid-Autumn Festival of 2023, Hong Kong had lifted all social distancing restrictions. Therefore, before heading to Ocean Park, the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance also arranged a parade in Stanley. In addition to being viewed as a cultural display, the Fire Dragon Dance team regarded Stanley as their own community, actively paying respects at various village temples along the way and parading along the Stanley Waterfront Promenade. They also allowed the public and tourists to insert incense sticks to increase interactivity.

This deliberately staged performance outside Pok Fu Lam Village preserved the folkloric aspects of the Fire Dragon Dance while maximising its cohesive and attractive qualities for tourists, transforming the activity into a showcase of traditional culture. Although Mr. Siu emphasised that the Dragon Dance was a ritual, not a performance, tourists and citizens often do not make this distinction. Even some reporters covering the performance inadvertently blurred the story of the Pok Fu Lam Village Fire Dragon Dance, emphasising its century-old history and occasionally misidentifying it as a national-level ICH, despite the fact that only the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance holds this national distinction.

For the Fire Dragon Association, these performances aim to enable the Fire Dragon Dance to traverse other districts of Hong Kong, ultimately leading to greater recognition of Pok Fu Lam Village. Mr. Siu mentioned the organisation's recent motto: 'No village, no dragon; no dragon, no village.' The motto encapsulates the belief that increased awareness of Pok Fu Lam will prevent the village from being demolished and redeveloped (*Dongfang Ribao* 2023).

While the heritagisation of the Fire Dragon Dance has not directly generated economic tourism revenue for Pok Fu Lam Village, it has provided access to various government funding schemes that support visibility and education initiatives. As one Fire Dragon Association committee member explained: 'We're not making money from this, but the funding helps us organise workshops, create educational materials, and maintain the tradition. Without these resources, it would be much harder to continue.'

In 2022, the Hong Kong Network for the Promotion of Inclusive Society collaborated with the Hong Kong Metropolitan University and successfully obtained a project under the Intangible Cultural Heritage Funding Scheme called 'Barrier-Free Appreciation of ICH' (Hong Kong Network for the Promotion of Inclusive Society 2024). This project aimed to arrange for visually and hearing-impaired individuals to experience various ICH activities. Upon learning about the significance of this project, Mr. Siu immediately improved the workshop arrangements, enhancing the experiential elements to accommodate both hearing and visually impaired participants (*Wenhuibao* 2022).



**Figure 6**  
Mr. Siu (wearing green shorts) guides the participants to make the fire dragon.  
Source: Author's own collection.

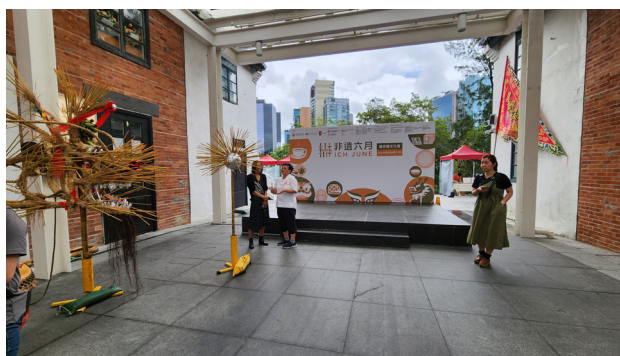


**Figure 7**  
Old Pok Fu Lam villager involved in the workshop for visually and hearing impaired individuals. Source: Author's own collection.

A representative from one of the NGOs involved in these workshops observed: 'The Fire Dragon Association was incredibly accommodating. They redesigned their workshops to ensure people with disabilities could fully experience the tradition through touch, sound, and other sensory elements. This kind of adaptation shows how a tradition can evolve while maintaining its core cultural significance.'

The Fire Dragon Association has also cooperated with other NGOs in similar activities, transforming the fire dragon crafting process from a necessary festival preparation into an opportunity for those who rarely have direct contact with ICH to experience the festivities. Since its ICH designation, the Fire Dragon Dance has gained increased visibility and is regarded as a means for the public to understand traditional Chinese culture. Even disadvantaged groups can participate through workshops tailored to their needs. This transformation has elevated the Pok Fu Lam Village Fire Dragon Dance into a shared symbol of Hong Kong's Chinese cultural traditions for a broader community.

Another example is the 'June of Intangible Cultural Heritage' event held in June 2024, jointly organised by the Huaxia Foundation and the Beijing–Hong Kong Academic Exchange Centre, both with semi-official Chinese backgrounds. In addition to typical ICH markets featuring handicraft sales, this edition of ICH June invited the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Association to a historical building in Kowloon, where they conducted workshops on making fire dragon heads and allowed participants to dance with the fire dragon (*Xianggang Shangbao* 2024a, 2024b).



**Figure 8**  
Display of the fire dragon in Kowloon. Source: Author's own collection.

Traditionally, the Pok Fu Lam Village Fire Dragon Dance is a villagers' festival held within the village during the Mid-Autumn Festival. However, it has now been transformed into a performance that the public can participate in, without restrictions on time and location. This transformation results from the ICH label being used in Hong Kong to portray local traditions as expressions of Chinese traditional culture and to convey the discourse that the histories of China and Hong Kong are inseparable. This label has brought more attention to the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance community, serving as a means to transform the village tradition into public ICH.

## Discussion: Authenticity, power and the politics of heritagisation

The transformation of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance reveals several important dynamics about the nature of cultural heritage in contemporary urban settings. This section of the paper explores the theoretical implications of this case study, examining tensions between authenticity and innovation, the role of power relations in heritagisation, and the strategic deployment of ICH designations by local communities.

### *Negotiating authenticity in a changing tradition*

The concept of authenticity, while no longer central to critical heritage studies, remains a concern for community members involved in the Fire Dragon Dance. As the tradition expands beyond its original village context, questions about what constitutes an 'authentic' practice inevitably arise. However, rather than viewing authenticity as a fixed quality, this case study suggests it is continuously negotiated through community practice and discourse.

The inclusion of non-villagers in the Fire Dragon Dance team, the performance of the dance in new locations such as Ocean Park and Stanley, and the adaptation of dragon-making workshops for diverse audiences all represent innovations in the tradition. Yet, they also serve to ensure its continued relevance and survival. As one younger villager put it: 'Traditions have to change to stay alive. What's the point of being "authentic" if no one practises it anymore?'

This perspective aligns with Laurajane Smith's (2006) concept of heritage as a cultural process rather than a fixed object or practice. The adaptations made to the Fire Dragon Dance demonstrate how heritage is actively created and re-created through ongoing social practices, rather than simply preserved in a static form. The tension between preservation and innovation becomes not a problem to be resolved but a productive space where community members negotiate the meaning and value of their tradition.

### ***Power relations and strategic heritage-making***

In Liao's (2011) study of the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance, he observed that communities often standardise historical narratives for external consumption. This strategic approach is evident in the case of Pok Fu Lam, where villagers have consistently seized opportunities to showcase their tradition not primarily to strengthen internal community bonds but to gain external recognition and support.

The conversion of the Fire Dragon Dance from a village-specific ritual to a shared Hong Kong tradition represents a strategic response to urbanisation pressures. By positioning their tradition as ICH with broader cultural significance, the villagers gain leverage in negotiations with government authorities regarding land use and development. As Mr. Siu expressed, the survival of the dance tradition and the physical village are intrinsically linked, each element reinforcing the protection of the other in their conservation strategy.

This strategic deployment of heritage designation reflects the political nature of ICH processes. Far from being neutral acts of cultural preservation, ICH designations involve complex negotiations of power between communities, government authorities and other stakeholders. The Pok Fu Lam villagers' success in securing ICH status for their Fire Dragon Dance demonstrates their agency in navigating these power

dynamics to serve community interests.

### ***De-villagisation and performatisation as adaptive strategies***

The dual processes of de-villagisation (expanding beyond the village) and performatisation (adapting the ritual for public display) have allowed the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance to survive and thrive in an urban context where traditional village practices might otherwise disappear. Rather than viewing these processes as compromising the tradition, they can be understood as adaptive strategies that ensure its continued relevance.

By embracing new performance contexts and audiences, the Fire Dragon Dance has secured resources and recognition that strengthen its position within Hong Kong's cultural landscape. The expansion to venues like Ocean Park, Stanley and Kowloon allows the tradition to reach new audiences while also reinforcing its importance to the original village community. As one committee member noted: 'When people from all over Hong Kong and beyond come to see our dragon, it makes us proud of our village and our tradition. It reminds us why we're fighting to keep both alive.'

This transformation challenges simplistic notions of 'commodification' or 'touristification' that often frame discussions of traditional practices in modern contexts. Instead, it demonstrates how communities can strategically engage with broader cultural and economic systems while maintaining core aspects of their traditions and pursuing community objectives.

### ***Implications for understanding ICH in urban contexts***

The case of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance offers valuable insights for understanding how ICH functions in urban contexts globally. As cities worldwide face rapid development and cultural change, communities increasingly turn to heritage designations as tools for negotiating their place in evolving urban landscapes.

The success of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance in adapting to new contexts while maintaining its cultural significance suggests that viability, rather than unchanging authenticity, may be the key to sustaining ICH in urban settings. By embracing change and strategically positioning their tradition within broader cultural narratives, the Pok Fu Lam community has ensured that their Fire Dragon Dance remains a living practice rather

than a museum piece.

This case study also highlights the importance of community agency in heritage processes. While government policies and institutional frameworks provide the context for ICH designation, it is the community's strategic engagement with these structures that determines how heritage designations affect traditional practices. The Pok Fu Lam villagers' active role in reshaping and promoting their tradition demonstrates that ICH can be a tool for community empowerment when communities themselves drive the process.

## Conclusion

The heritagisation of the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance offers valuable insights into the complex processes of cultural preservation and adaptation in urban settings. This case study demonstrates how local communities can strategically leverage ICH designations to maintain and reinvent their traditions, even as they negotiate broader societal expectations and pressures. The transformation of the Fire Dragon Dance from a village-specific practice to a shared cultural resource for Hong Kong illustrates the plasticity of cultural heritage and its potential as a tool for community empowerment.

The de-villagisation and performatisation of the dance represent not a dilution of tradition but adaptive strategies that have ensured its continued relevance and vitality. By expanding beyond its original community and embracing new performance contexts, the Fire Dragon Dance has secured resources and recognition that strengthen both

the tradition itself and the community from which it originated.

This paper also reveals the importance of understanding heritage not as a fixed object to be preserved but as an ongoing cultural process shaped by various stakeholders. The tensions between authenticity and innovation, between community tradition and public performance, create productive spaces where cultural meaning is continuously negotiated and renewed. The mixed perceptions among villagers regarding these changes highlight that heritagisation is rarely a straightforward or universally embraced process, even within the community itself.

For heritage professionals and policymakers, the Pok Fu Lam case demonstrates the importance of flexible approaches to ICH that allow for community agency and adaptation. Successful preservation of living traditions may depend not on rigid adherence to past forms but on a community's ability to recontextualise their cultural practices in response to changing urban landscapes and global heritage discourses.

Finally, this paper proposes that participants in the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance might further expand their reach by engaging with national discourse and considering cross-border cooperation with similar fire dragon traditions in mainland Chinese provinces or cities. Such connections could potentially elevate the Pok Fu Lam Fire Dragon Dance to national-level ICH status, providing an opportunity for the tradition to be recognised more broadly while maintaining its essential connection to the village that gave it birth. 🏠

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