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## CONSERVATION OF CULTURE HERITAGE – HAKKA HERITAGE IN HONG KONG

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### Abstract

Recently, in most of the world, there has been an increasing attention given to heritage. However, Hong Kong, as a financial center, has concentrated on its economic development, and in that time, some of its cultural heritage has disappeared and heritage buildings have been allowed to deteriorate. This paper studies the declining Hakka Heritage in Hong Kong. It briefly outlines the history, character, costume, cuisine, and traditions of the Hakka people with special emphasis on their buildings. It also investigates the reasons behind the decline of this distinctive heritage in Hong Kong, and suggests that the main reasons for the deterioration of heritage buildings have been identified as poor maintenance, inappropriate cleaning methods, and the appointment of non-specialists in professional roles as well as unsympathetic alterations and repairs. The findings suggest that the preservation of Hakka heritage requires work in what can be classified into three areas: legislation and policies, promotion and education to deal with the economic, political, human and social factors that affect heritage conservation in Hong Kong. Some recommendations on conservation of Hakka Heritage are discussed.

**Keywords** culture heritage, conservation, historical building, Hakka, HK

### INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasing attention given to heritage in most of the world recently. Heritage is not only old buildings, but also represents the things of value that are inherited (Hall and McArthur, 1998). SIDA (2004) suggested that heritage should be seen as a culturally constructed idea and set of values that are attached to a wide range of artefacts, environments and cultural forms. Cultural heritage refers to human created remains that represent unique cultures of the past, including tangible assets, such as groups of buildings, and intangible assets, such as performing arts, of human heritage (UNESCO, 2000). Aesthetic, historical, scientific, social and economical are the five types of cultural heritage (Byrne, 2003). Cultural heritage is significant for both human being and nations. Preservation the remains of past cultures manifest cultural continuity and help to construct identities and social cohesion. Also, it is an educational resource for creating respect and understanding among different cultures, and is a resource for creativity, innovation and pluralism. Cultural heritage may attract of tourism, attract of investment and development of industry and entrepreneurship, attract of new residents and influence on the local community.

Many researches focussed research on cultural heritage in relation to policy impact, stakeholders involving, and application. Nypan (2004) proposed that cultural

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heritage monuments and historic buildings as value generators in a post-industrial economy. Greffe (2004) suggested that heritage is an asset that provides the means of satisfying a wide variety of aspirations, such as creating jobs, by using France as an illustration. Oiger and Onton (2004) examined and analyzed the technical condition of the structure and to work out restoration solution for the hydroplane hangar reinforced concrete shells. The hydroplane hangar was designed and erected around 1916-17 in Tallinn, Estonia. They concluded that the hangar structures need strengthening and renovation in near time to prevent their collapse. Cestari and Marzi (2004) presented how the research on wooden cultural heritage can promote policies in European Countries through a concrete approach of transfer of knowledge from theory to practice in the field of restoration, re-use, and technological innovation in wooden constructions with special care to environmental aspects.

This research illustrates the declining Hakka Heritage and investigates the reasons behind the decline of this distinctive heritage in Hong Kong. Next section briefly studies Hakka heritage, includes the history, character, cuisine, and traditions of the Hakka people with special emphasis on their buildings. The third section discusses the complexity of conservation of cultural heritage. The discussion and some recommendations on conservation of Hakka Heritage are discussed in the last.

## **THE HAKKA HERITAGE IN HONG KONG**

The Hakka is one of the unique cultures with a special ethnic group and with a long history in mainland China. Hakka's dialect, residence, folklore, buildings and Hakka females' dispositions show distinct characteristics in comparison with that of other people in Chinese history. Being one of the indigenous settlers in Hong Kong, Hakka people pay an important part in Hong Kong's history and economic development. Thus, it is important to preserve this heritage asset in order to keep the root in Hong Kong.

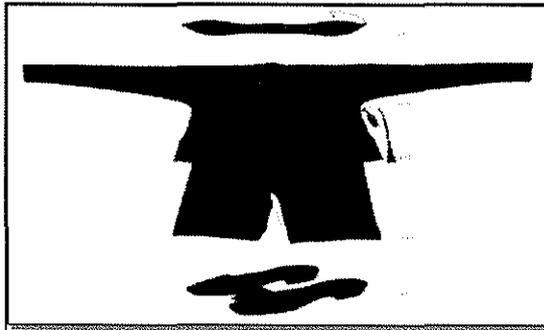
The origin of the Hakkas lived in the northern part of mainland China several hundred years ago, having their own language and culture. Because of the impact of wars and political and economic factors, the Hakkas moved collectively over to the southern part of mainland China – to Guangdong, Jiangxi, Fujian, and in Southeast Asia, like Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (Wong, 2005). Since they came from the northern region, the native people viewed them as 'guests' or 'new comers'.

The Hakkas are the second large local inhabitant of Hong Kong. There are about thirty villages in Tsuen Wan District. Some of the villages remain outside the bounds of the city in their original locations in the foothills of Tai Mou Shan, the biggest mountain in Hong Kong (Hayes, 1983). Some of the visible markers of Hakka cultural difference, acknowledged by them as expressions of ethnic identity, have been disappearing. These include features of women's dress, unicorn dancing, and the signing of mountain songs while working together.

### **Character and food of Hakka People**

The character of the Hakkas is shown quite clearly in their name and history. They are a strong, hardy, energetic, fearless race with simple habits but a very contentious and litigious disposition (Lee, 2001). They have unique clothing (Figure 1). The colours are usually deep blue, dark and grey; made up of woven linen which is very durable. The "cool hat" is specially designed for Hakka women to work on the field (Figure 2).

Hakka cuisine has introduced unique preserving methods and new aromatic seasonings. Pork is the most favoured meat of the Hakkas. "Poon Choi" or "Big Bowl Feast" is a special kind of dish served in wooden basins, for special occasions, wedding banquets and festivals. The ingredients in a basin are layered with radish, dried eel, dried shrimp, pig skin and bean curd on the bottom. The 'salty', 'fatty', and 'aromatic' food represent the Hakka people survived the hardships of earlier days through their spirit of frugality.



**Figure 1: Unique Hakka Clothing**



**Figure 2: The 'cool hat'**

Source: Antiquities and Monuments office, Hong Kong

### **Hakka Buildings**

The design of Hakka houses are characterized by their modest living, clan unity, sense of defence and ancestral worship. A traditional house usually holds several dozen to a hundred families. One can imagine that the architect must take pains to design such a huge project which embraces so many people (Antiquities and Monuments office).

In square, rectangular, semicircular and round shapes, the surrounding houses or walled village often have two or three storeys with windows, facing outside and the door facing inside. Some villages have two to three circles of surrounding structures. The rooms upstairs and downstairs serve as bedrooms, kitchens, storage places and livestock sheds. Between the buildings are courtyards where residents dry things on sunny days, drain water on rainy days, or hold outdoor activities. In case of fire, the lanes around the walls and the courtyards help to prevent the fire from spreading.

The layout of each building is different. With some, the front door, portico, courtyard, middle hall and main hall are the central axis with chambers, living rooms, and courtyards arranged symmetrically on both sides. Some use the middle hall as an ancestral hall, which is flanked by chambers and backs on to two or three rectangular surrounding buildings.

There is a pond in front of each house for collecting water drained from the courtyard. People raise fish and wash clothes and vegetables in the pond and water the vegetable garden with the water from the pond. If there is a fire, the water from the pond is used to put it out.

The ancestral hall is the heart of a house. On festivals, families make sacrificial offerings to their ancestors. Anyone from the family who comes home from far away or is going to marry must go to the ancestral hall to pay respects to their forefathers. So do girls who are going to marry in another place or members of the family who are leaving home. It also serves as a mourning hall if one of the family elders dies. With their own unique structures, the surrounding buildings of the

Hakkas are suitable for family life, although as a mourning hall if one of the family elders dies.

Some typical features of the Hakka houses are shown as follows:

### Lam Tsuen

Located in the northwestern part of Tai Po, Lam Tsuen was a Hakka settlement formed by 26 villages of different sizes. Today, many Hakka elderly reside in these villages. In Lam Tsuen, festive occasions are held in the ancestral halls. Yet, in the old days, whenever a villager was about to pass away, he or she would be moved into the ancestral hall to be taken care of by fellow villagers until death (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Lam Tsuen



Figure 4: Sam Tung Uk Village

Source: Antiquities and Monuments office, Hong Kong

### Sam Tung Uk Village

Sam Tung Uk is a local example of typical Hakka buildings built in 1786. On the central axis are three halls - the front hall, middle hall and ancestral hall - which give the village its name (Figure 4). On the two sides are four detached living rooms, while the terrace houses on the left and right and at the back enclose the village. This shows the flexibility and richness in the layout of rural dwellings. The village shows a rigorous planning in an area of about 2000 m<sup>2</sup>. The plan is strictly symmetrical, with the house units organised in an orderly fashion (Lung and Chan, 1994).

### Kun Lung Wai

This walled village, which dates back to 1744, is enclosed by green-brick walls. A pair of chained-ring iron gates is installed at the front entrance. The moat, which originally surrounded the walled village, has been filled in. The layout of the houses inside the village is in an orderly manner, with a communal altar situated at the end of the main alley. It is famous for its enclosing wall and watch tower (Figure 5).

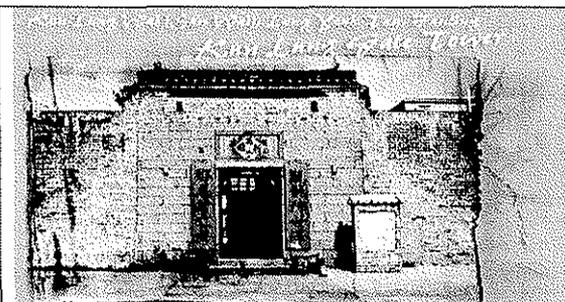


Figure 5: The Kun Lung Wai



Figure 6: Wall and watch tower

Source: Antiquities and Monuments office, Hong Kong

### The Tang Ancestral Hall

The Tang Ancestral Hall was constructed by Tang Fung-shun, the fifth generation ancestor of Tang Clan about 700 years ago. It is a magnificent three-hall structure

with two internal courtyards and is one of the finest examples of its kind in Hong Kong. The wooden brackets and beams of the three halls are elegantly carved with auspicious Chinese motifs. The main ridges and roofs are decorated with fine Shiwan dragon-fish and pottery unicorns. Ancestral tablets are located at the altar at the rear hall (Figure 6).

Hakka buildings display a rich knowledge of proportion as a design principle (Lung and Chan, 1994). Though most of heritage buildings have been protected as a monument or restored, some of them are still waiting for attention.

## **COMPLEXITY OF CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE**

What are the basic factors of the complexity of cultural heritage? Cortines (2004) suggested that heritage changes constantly in a complex system. The destruction of cultural heritage can be irreversible once destruction. The reconstructed cultural heritage site may be, at least partly different from the original (SIDA, 2004). The main risks arise from the loss of density, historic nature, complexity and quality of urban historical areas (Hassler, Algree-Ussing and Kohler, 2002). The risks and threats to cultural heritage create a complexity of conservation of cultural heritage.

### **Disappearance of Hakka culture in Hong Kong**

Even though there is a considerable Hakka population in Hong Kong, Hakka people are still disadvantaged in political and economic aspects. To adapt themselves, Hakka people always conceal their language and culture by learning from the other advantaged ethnic groups to avoid prejudice which affects their survival and development. Over a long period of time, many Hakka people forget their mother tongue and culture, and would even neglect their real Hakka identity for generations.

Furthermore, Hong Kong is a post-colonial city, it compose of a mixed culture between the east and the west. People usually feel confuse of the national identity in the past and even nowadays. Thus most of them still lack of home town belonging and refuse to accept their past and unremarkable identity. At the time when Hakka people are gradually becoming an invisible ethnic group, Hakka culture is declining rapidly.

Cultural crisis faced by the Hakka people is a core of ethnic issue. Causes of the cultural crisis come from mainstream culture, society and value, followed by affects from modernization and globalization. Diversity implies that there is distinct harmony between different ethnic groups as well as between cultures, and there should be no forced harmony. That means anti-globalization and not turning to the same end.

### **Physical threats and natural hazards**

The physical heritage from the past, such as buildings, man-made structures, cultivated landscapes of sites of symbolic value, are important features of our environment and of our culture (SIDA, 2004). However, a lot of physical heritage have been devastated because of natural disasters and war. The changes of natural conditions in humidity, soil characteristics, and cold/heat speed up the natural processes (ICOMOS, 2000). These processes such as natural decay of materials, rot and corrosion are hazards to the heritage. The lack of development and scarcity of economic resources of maintenance and knowledge as well as professional skills in respect of traditional techniques and materials often leads a difficulty of conservation of heritage.

## **Maintenance Deficiency**

Some culture ignores of historical and cultural heritage. The decision-makers share this ignorance to the fate of these assets. They may believe in an ideology that is guided by a strong faith in modernization coupled with contempt for older buildings, local traditions and materials (SIDA, 2004). As a result, weak policy and less resource are allocated to preserve, renew and reconstruct these heritage assets. In the case of Hong Kong, there is no mandatory requirement for buildings to carry out renovation work. Thus, most of the old buildings which are valuable to be kept deteriorate rapidly and in poor conditions.

There may be difficulties in restoring the building to original conditions though that the government has declared monument protection. Due to the specific architectural characteristics of many vernacular buildings – size, shape, location, type of construction – maintenance is a major effort that requires specific skills and resources. For example, some kind of building materials for those build heritage have stop further production and suitable substitutes need to be found from other countries.

On the other hand, due to the money-orientated mind of the village people, many old buildings with high historical value are turn down and rebuild to sell at a better profit. These people just ignore the significance of their cultural heritage to Hong Kong and their selfishness is just destroying our valuable assets. In order to meet the commercial need, certain alterations are to be made inside heritage buildings which make the buildings into new function. However, most of the new use of the building is usually not fidelity to the building's architectural and historical character. This implies that some changes may be irrevocable and destroy the original characteristics.

Due to lack of monitor of rural build heritage, those heritages may be threatened by violence, vandalism or total destruction. This heritage may also be subject to particular economic and tax constraints that put the weight of conservation on individual owners and thus lead to poor maintenance. Change of ownership within the family, by confiscation and restitution or by sale, creates discontinuity in the custodial role and often leads to the sale of furniture and surrounding land.

Some of the building techniques found in vernacular architecture, such as earthen construction techniques, are particularly vulnerable and require special attention. Lack of professional expertise on maintenance and inappropriate cleaning methods accelerate the lost or damage of the heritage buildings.

## **Modern development**

In the last few decades developing countries have been going through a phase of urbanization with a rapidly growing urban population. The result is not only urban expansion, but also greater pressure on more central urban areas, such as road widening, new motorways and high-rise housing (Kerr, 2000).

Preservation is often in conflict with modernization and business development. Few isolated historical buildings remaining are preserved for tourists as the modernization of urban areas (Throsby, 2001). Also, some project planning without adequate consultation with inhabitants and other stakeholders break up existing social networks and cultural environment (Randall, 2002). If projects dealing with the infrastructure are insensitively planned, both age-old links and communication routes in the countryside and historical urban areas can be dismantled.

Most of the vernacular heritage such as, rural buildings and villages, which is composed of modest elements that embody building traditions and a popular culture of architecture and construction, are demolished or renovated using modern materials to meet the images of modern comfort. Entire villages are left empty by population migration. Many are being destroyed in the context of large industrial, power generation or land reform projects.

Hong Kong has now grown to a metropolitan and under rapid economic growth. For a long period of time, the Hong Kong government had put almost all of its attention on the economic development and had underestimated the significance of cultural heritage on Hong Kong's whole development. Thus, the government is not willing to invest on conservation works and funding allocated to heritage conservation every year is very little. This makes it more difficult to management cultural heritage as general maintenance and operation of historical sites need cost to run. This also leads to poor maintenance of many built heritages especially those Hakka walled village in the New Territories.

### **Lack of conservation awareness and training**

The decision-maker may not put much effort on promoting minor heritage group such as Hakka heritage as it is a non-profit making activity. There is not any topic in primary and secondary school which teach about conservation of local cultural heritage and thus lead to the general ignorance of the significance of Hakka heritage in the next generations. People may not realize the importance of heritage conservation. There are also lack of policy and legal tools to a corporate attitude of conservation; lack of promotion and operational research; insufficient training program and limited knowledge of heritage conservation.

All the above factors make conservation more difficult. Thus, the main reasons for the deterioration of heritage buildings have been identified as poor maintenance, inappropriate cleaning methods, and the appointment of non-specialists in professional roles as well as unsympathetic alterations and repairs.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The study investigates of the Hakka heritage. It is found that heritages have political, socio-cultural and economical significance to a society and it is necessary to protect heritage from disappearing. The preservation works can be categorized into three areas: legislation, promotion and education. Although the Hong Kong government has put much effort on conservation works of cultural heritage, there still problems in managing and preserving these heritage resources and thus they are still a risk of disappearing.

### **Government Policy**

Hong Kong is still a city with limited land resources with expanding population. In order to accommodate more people and gain more incomes, the government has to sell more land to property developer for real estate development. These developers are all profit-making and ignore the importance of preserving heritage remain in their sites. Thus many heritage resources are destroyed unremarkably.

The recently funding system only covers the management and maintenance of the declared monuments in Hong Kong. There is not any funding specific for compensation to property owners of those built heritage. Thus the government need to pay high price from government saving in purchasing those historical buildings and most of the property owners are unwilling to give up their building to

the government for heritage conservation due to unsuccessful bargain. Some historical building sites are just with poor maintenance due to insufficient funding and property owners are not willing to pay by themselves.

### **Economic Development**

The major income of Hong Kong government comes from selling land to property developers. When there is a conflict between land sale and preserving heritage assets, very often the latter is sacrificed.

As the Antiquities and Monuments Office is only an administrative department with limited power to enforce the law, it had to rely on negotiations and persuasion when trying to carry out its duties. Thus, when neither negotiation nor persuasion works, the preservation of ancient remains will have to give way to development in the future (Antiquities and Monuments office).

Due to the economic problems, many local communities and politicians now view cultural heritage, including archaeological remains, as a way of generating income either for the territory or for the local communities, through tourism and other economic activities such as building a shopping mall, theme park, etc. There are pros and cons to this trend. While more resources may be invested to protect the ancient remains in order to generate income, a lack of proper management could cause severe damage to these remains once they have become a destination for tourist.

Thus, the economic factor is like the two-hand-sword, on one hand can foster the conservation of cultural heritage; on another hand can damage the heritage resources.

### **Human Resources**

There is insufficient supply of professional human resources in heritage conservation in Hong Kong. No tertiary institution in Hong Kong offer undergraduate major in archaeology or on the management of cultural heritage. The majority of archaeologists who can be in charge of field excavations in Hong Kong at present are not very young. Recently, the human resources needed to carry out works of restoration and to repair old buildings using traditional techniques are insufficient, so government also has to invite professionals and craftsmen from overseas or mainland China. It is hard to maintain the efficient management of cultural resources without a stable professional team with local experience and expertise.

Furthermore, under the resent education system, there is not any subjects taught in the primary and secondary school in related to the topic of heritage conservation. The next generation is generally lack of the interest and knowledge in preserving cultural heritage of Hong Kong. As a result, seldom student will work in heritage conservation stream when grown up. These human factors slow down the heritage preservation process in Hong Kong.

### **Globalization and Cultural Conflict**

Due to the advance in modern technology, people nowadays can have close contact with others living a distance away and share their distinctive culture with each other. Thus different cultures from the world are globalizing into one single culture. Usually only the strong cultures which possess both political and economical value can remain.

Hong Kong is no exception as it is a highly commercialized city with rapid modernization and active economic activities. Hong Kong people can have close contact with the rest of the world through the mass media, for example news, magazine, internet...etc. everyday. Therefore, these people, especially for those little children, are gradually assimilating into other advantage ethnic group's culture. McDonaldisation is an example all over the world and many youngsters prefer to have unhealthy fast food meal more than their traditional home meal.

Also this kind of culture is legitimated on the grounds that it is popular with the masses. Brand names take the place of choice in a world where advertising is very powerful. In such a world the distinction between local and global culture no longer exists, and so critical distinctions between cultural experience and mere gratification break down.

Hong Kong is a place with a "the east mixed with the west" culture. Thus there is easily culture conflict between different culture groups and make people feel confuse about their own culture. Without clear identity, it is hard for Hong Kong people to find what heritages to conserve, not even participate in conservation works.

### **SUGGESTED METHODS TO RETAIN HONG KONG'S LOCAL HERITAGE**

Conservation of culture heritage is multi-dimensional task that requires the co-operation and interaction with professionals: people directly concerned with the maintenance of cultural heritage including conservators, curators, art historians, archaeologists; and analytical scientists, including chemists, physicists, geologists, metallurgists, mineralogists and microbiologists. The main objective of the action is to improve the preservation and conservation of our cultural heritage by increasing our knowledge of museum objects through non-destructive analysis and testing (Adriaens, 2004). Some suggestions are:

#### **Increase the Awareness of Heritage Conservation**

It is necessary to identify the value of cultural heritage, especially for those built heritage, from the viewpoint of cultural continuity. The present is the history of the future. A lot more needs to be done to promote the idea of preserving cultural heritage, including archaeological remains, particularly to the public in order to increase the people's awareness on heritage conservations. Public support is the strongest power to push the government on heritage preservation issues.

#### **Better Government Policy and Planning**

It is important in the government policy that preserving cultural heritage not be in conflict with economic development. With good and balanced management it is possible to create mutual benefit. As cultural tourism is becoming popular, well-preserved and well managed archaeological and other heritage sites can be attractive destinations for tourists without causing severe damage to the sites. Also, town planning should take the preservation of cultural heritage into account, and clear guidelines and implementation are necessary. Furthermore, there should be improvement to the government funding system for heritage conservation. Thus, when both negotiation and persuasion fails, the government can still use the funding to purchase the whole site for future conservation. Finally, as Hong Kong are still facing financial problems, the government should establish certain bylaws or regulations and require private companies to pay for salvage excavations and other incentives for them to do so.

## **Extend Promotion and Education on Heritage Conservation**

For promotion, participation from the public should be encouraged and further promoted. Heritage site can be promoted as a tourist point for cultural tourism and attract more local and foreign visitor to visit these places. Exhibition on heritage conservation can be extended to dense area such as shopping mall rather than only being set in particular museums. Also, the government should gain supports from the local residence and even those property owner of the built heritage as their participations are very important in the process of conservation.

For education, there is an urgent need to train the younger generation, as human resources in heritage conservation stream are insufficient. Therefore, the government should consider introducing new subject about cultural heritage to the education sector so that students can have deeper understanding in Hong Kong's cultural heritage. Also, the government should set up research funding so that universities can have better academic research in this subject and invent new measures to preserve Hong Kong's heritage resources.

It can be seen that, preservation of cultural heritage is not only the government's responsibility. We are the owner of these valuable heritage assets and thus we should be the one responsible for protecting our own things so that our next generation can have the chance to appreciate and learn from our past. Further study may address the ways of preventive deteriorations of built heritage.

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