

Exploring the Effectiveness of Archival Methods in Preserving Hong Kong's Urban Culture.

Ethnographic field notes and the "hellomyhongkong" initiative



Introduction

The Committee of Freedom in Hong Kong reports

500,000+

citizens migrating since 2020 due to the National Security Law. As the law becomes more permanent in the Hong Kong legislative landscape, the urgency to preserve its culture grows.

Objectives

By the end of the 2 years, I aim to create a digital archive to preserve the the dynamic culture of Hong Kong.

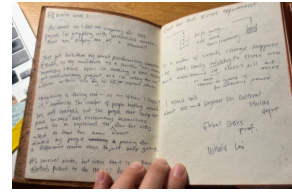
This summer, I investigated how the mass exodus changed the urban culture and legacy of Hong Kong.

Then, I reviewed existing digital and material archival methods as applied to culture and heritage; assess their effectiveness, feasibility, and scope; and investigate what would be most relevant to the diasporic Hong Kongers.

Lastly, I hosted an independent initiative to experiment with participatory archival techniques that might inspire next summer's work.

Ethnographic Research

Transcriptions of my ethnographic field notes. Full qualitative analysis can be found in my paper.



Update on Hong Kong

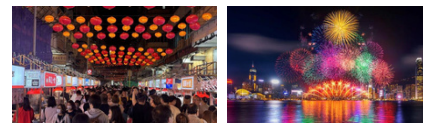
"It reminds me of a titration experiment from high school—small, almost imperceptible changes that accumulate until, suddenly, the entire solution changes color. Similarly, in Hong Kong, the change has been gradual yet profound, occurring slowly and almost invisibly to those who don't think about it, or perhaps choose not to—for many coping Hong Kongers, it's the latter."

"Even compared to just a year ago when I was last home, there is something in the air that makes Hong Kong feel dimmer. Certain customary behaviours have been lost. There is noticeably less Cantonese being heard in the streets, and many of the beloved "hole-in-the-wall" spots have closed due to a lack of local customers. On public transport, where once people would chat loudly to their friends over the sound of the wind rushing through the train, now they bury their heads in their phones and video games. Restaurant customers dine alone, waiters seem more impatient, and gatherings with friends feel more distant—both in frequency and in spirit, as fewer friends remain."

Analysing Government Run Cultural Initiatives

"Even the government's efforts to boost the city's morale feel hollow and disingenuous."

"Hong Kong's Leisure and Cultural Services Department organised initiatives like nightly fireworks by the harbour, night markets, and pop-up photo booths with cute figures."



Hosever, these efforts seem more focused on creating photo opportunities than fostering genuine experiences. Pictures of these events mainly populated mainland Chinese social media sites like Little Red Book instead of local ones"

Their efforts to fill the void they've created with these events and activities result in unsustainable and contrived cultural experiences that lack authenticity. The more initiatives get pushed out, the farther away I feel like we are to the goal of boosting the city's morale."

Analysing Museums, Cultural Centers, Galleries and Archives



"I began to wonder if locals actually visit these institutions as often, as I noticed that most visitors of the M+ were also tourists, not locals."

"Unfortunately, [Asia Society] had to decline my request due to a reduction in office staff. I could sense their regret in turning me down, but it was clear they were facing challenges of their own, as most of the colleagues I worked with last year had either been let go or moved on to other opportunities."

"While I was grateful to have access to these resources, I couldn't help but think that there might be a more engaging way to present this information to everyday people who aren't necessarily inclined to sift through books like a student."

Independent Initiatives

"hellomyhongkong"

The "@hellomyhongkong" initiative was designed as a cultural experiment aimed at gauging the emotional and psychological climate of Hong Kong residents in a time of significant socio-political change.

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哈囉，我嘅香港係

分享比 @hellomyhongkong IG

The primary objective was to assess whether a participatory archive, a method of cultural preservation involving public contributions, could effectively engage Hong Kongers who may currently be hesitant to connect with their cultural heritage.



Breakdown of Data:

Positive Connotations (16)	Negative Connotations (3)	Mixed Emotions (5)
Culture (5) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Work hard play hard," "Wan Chai Wednesdays" "買嘢" (Buy Shit) "ART, like this" DLLM 	Negative Apathy (1): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "普通城市" (A normal city) Weather (1): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "好撻熱" (So Fucking Hot) Culture (1): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Smoke break" 	"Home" (4): (categorized under places) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responses varied between the literal sense of "home" and more abstract, cultural or identity-based connotations.
Food (4): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Egg Tarts" "茶餐廳" (Tea houses) "小食天堂 (魚蛋, 燒賣, 雞蛋仔)" (Street Food Heaven) "甜酸苦辣的大排檔" (Dai Pai Dong) 	Positive Apathy (2): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Pretty good." 	Nostalgia (1): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "以前很開心嘅地方! 廣東話好正!" (Somewhere I used to be very happy in! I love Cantonese!)
Places (1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Ocean Park" 	Swear Words (4): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DLLM Dogshit 好撻熱 Buy Shit 	
Beauty (1): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "美麗的海港" (Beautiful Harbourview) 		



Takeaways:

While cultural preservation is important, the reason why archives might feel a bit stagnant is because it can be painful to reconcile with all the change- this is a pattern I observed through this initiative. Change is inevitable, and attempting to revert to the past might be a futile, and even counterproductive, effort for people who are trying to forge new lives."