

Four traditional activities from Hong Kong successfully inscribed onto the national list of intangible cultural heritage

The Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, said today (June 3) that he was pleased to see four local intangible cultural heritage items, the Cheung Chau Jiao Festival, the Tai O dragon boat water parade, the Tai Hang fire dragon dance and the Yu Lan Ghost Festival of the Hong Kong Chiu Chow community, had been successfully inscribed onto the third national list of intangible cultural heritage. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) will liaise closely with the bearer organisations to take forward measures for preserving, promoting and transmitting these parts of Hong Kong's cultural heritage.

In September 2009, the HKSAR Government submitted an application for these four items to be inscribed onto the third national list of intangible cultural heritage. And the four items fall within the category of "social practices, rituals and festive events" set out in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Mr Tsang Tak-sing said, "These four items all have unique characteristics and cultural value. In spite of modernisation and urbanisation, they have been passed on from generation to generation and helped maintain the bonds of people in local communities, which has made the events particularly valuable. The cultural significance of these four items is recognised by their being inscribed onto the third national list of intangible cultural heritage. We will continue our commitment to preserving and promoting local heritage and will also encourage the participation of the community in supporting the continuation and development of Hong Kong's traditional culture."

Mr Tsang also said, "The HKSAR Government is now conducting a territory-wide survey of intangible cultural heritage in Hong Kong that is expected to complete in 2012. The first inventory of Hong Kong's intangible cultural heritage will be compiled using data collected through the survey. This will help formulate comprehensive safeguarding measures for local intangible cultural heritage."

Details of the four items successfully inscribed onto the third national list of intangible cultural heritage are as follows:

(1) Cheung Chau Jiao Festival

The activity has been practised for more than 100 years. Cheung Chau was devastated by a plague in the late Qing dynasty. Local residents set up a sacrificial altar in front of Pak Tai Temple to pray to the god Pak Tai to drive off evil spirits. The residents even paraded deity statues through the village lanes. The plague ceased after performance of the ritual. Since then, residents on Cheung Chau have organised a Jiao Festival every year to express thanks to the god for blessing and protecting them. With residents' participation every year, the ritual has been passed down through the generations.

(2) Tai O dragon boat water parade

During the annual Dragon Boat Festival, three fishermen's associations, Pa Teng, Sin Yu Heung and Hap Sim Tong, organise a religious activity known as the dragon boat water parade. On the morning before the festival, members of the associations row their dragon boats to visit four temples in Tai O, where they receive statues of Yeung Hou, Tin Hau, Kwan Tei and Hung Shing. They carry the deity statues back to their associations' hall for worship. On the day of the festival, the deity statues are put on sacred sampans towed by the associations' dragon boats to parade through Tai O's waters. The deity statues are returned to the respective temples after the ritual. This unique religious activity has been preserved for more than a century.

(3) Tai Hang fire dragon dance

The event has been held for more than 100 years. Tai Hang was originally a Hakka village. Legend has it that a plague broke out there in 1880, and to ward off the disease the villagers planted joss sticks in a dragon-shaped form. On the evening of the 14th, 15th and 16th of the eighth lunar month, the villagers paraded the fire dragon through the village and let off firecrackers. The plague ended after the event. From then on, the villagers have performed a three-day fire dragon dance every year to bless themselves.

(4) Yu Lan Ghost Festival of the Hong Kong Chiu Chow community

There are about 1.2 million people originating from Chiu Chow in Hong Kong who actively carry on their traditions. During the ghost festival, which lasts for a month every year, the Chiu Chow people in Hong Kong organise the Yu Lan Festival that starts from the first day of the seventh lunar month and continues until the end of

that month. Having been held for more than 100 years, the festival is to offer sacrifices to ancestors and the wandering ghosts in the netherworld. The main activities include burning incense and joss papers, performing live Chinese operas and dramas for ghosts, distributing auspicious rice and auctioning auspicious objects.

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