

Hong Kong's first application for inscription on national list of intangible cultural heritage (with photos)

The Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, said that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government had submitted today (September 28) an application for the inscription of the Jiao-festival of Cheung Chau, the dragon boat water parade of Tai O, the fire dragon dance of Tai Hang, and the Yu Lan Ghost Festival of the Hong Kong Chiu Chow Community on the third national list of intangible cultural heritage in China.

The Ministry of Culture (MoC) invited the HKSAR Government to apply for inscription on the third national list of intangible cultural heritage in July this year. Having consulted the experts, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) decided to make applications for the above four items and the relevant documents have been submitted to the MoC. The result is expected to be announced in June 2010.

The State Council announced two batches totalling 1,028 items inscribed on the national list of intangible cultural heritages in 2006 and 2008. During the first inscription, the governments of Guangdong, Hong Kong SAR and Macao SAR jointly applied successfully for the inscription of Cantonese opera and traditional herbal teas on the national list of intangible cultural heritage.

The current application is the first time the HKSAR Government has submitted its own applications to inscribe local items on the national list of intangible cultural heritage.

"The submission of these four items is a trial attempt. We hope to be able to establish a more comprehensive selection and application mechanism in the longer run," Mr Tsang said.

The four items under application are in the category of "social practices, rituals and festive events" defined by the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" promulgated by UNESCO.

Mr Tsang said, "The items have been conserved from generation to generation in the Hong Kong community for more than 100 years. They are representative of their kind and well recognised by the general public. Detailed studies and records of those items by scholars were available for preparation of the application documents."

The Government appointed five experts in intangible cultural heritage to join a panel to examine the application documents. They were Prof Selina Chan Ching, Prof Cheung Chin-hung, Dr Elizabeth Sinn Yuk-yee, Prof Siu Kwok-kin, and Dr Joseph Ting Sun-pao.

Following a thorough examination of the application documents, the expert panel considered that the four items all had outstanding historical and cultural values, had been transmitted from generation to generation with great impact on the community, and were representative in illustrating the creativity of Chinese culture, thus meeting the criteria for inscription on the national list. The panel unanimously recommended the proposed applications.

Details of the four items under application are as follows:

(1) Jiao-festival of Cheung Chau: This 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 the deity statues through the village lanes. The plague ended after performance of the ritual. Since then, residents on Cheung Chau have organised a Bun Festival every year to express thanks to the god for blessing and protecting them. With residents' participation every year, the ritual was passed down through the generations. The festival also provides a platform for residents to perform their folk craft, such as making paper-mache effigies of deities, setting up the bamboo scaffolding of the Bun Mountain, and making handmade buns in preparation for the Bun Festival. This is accompanied by folk performing arts like Taoist rituals and music, a parade, lion dances, qilin dances and drum beating. The elderly residents participate in this festive activity with their children, preserving it from one generation to the next.

(2) Dragon boat water parade of Tai O: During the annual Dragon Boat Festival, three fishermen associations, Pa Teng, Sin Yu-heung and Hap Sim Tong, organise a religious activity known as a "deities parade". On the morning before the festival, members of the associations row their dragon boats to visit four temples, Yeung Hau, San Tsuen Tin Hou, Kwan Tei and Hung Shing, and 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 dragon boats of the associations to parade through Tai O waters and to pacify the wandering water ghosts. Residents of the stilt houses

along the water-courses burn paper offerings. The deity statues are returned to the respective temples after the ritual. In the past 20 to 30 years, the fishing industry in Tai O has faded. Most fishermen turned to other businesses, diminishing the scale of this ritual, which has been conserved for more than 100 years. There is an imminent need to preserve this unique ritual.

(3) Fire dragon dance of Tai Hang: This event has been transmitted for more than 100 years. Tai Hang was originally a Hakka village. Legend has it that a plague broke out there in 1880. To ward off the disease, the villagers planted joss sticks in a dragon, which was made of grass. On the evening of the 14th, 15th and 16th of the eighth lunar month, the villagers parade 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. The fire dragon dance in Tai Hang has now become a unique intangible cultural heritage of Hong Kong.

(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. As they miss their families and ancestors deeply, they 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 Yun Lan Festival which starts from the first day of the seventh lunar month until the end of that month. The festival has been held for more than 100 years. The main activity in the festival is to offer sacrifices to ancestors and the wandering ghosts in the netherworld. The activities also include burning incense and joss papers, performing live Chinese operas and dramas for ghosts, and distributing free rice. These performances usually take place in parks, piazzas, pitches or other sufficiently spacious places. Song and performance stages and a sacrificial altar are set up at each venue and the dramas are mainly in Chiu Chow style. Other performing arts and handicraft making are also held. Activities in relation to the Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival are held at 60 different places in the territory.

Ends/Monday, September 28, 2009

Issued at HKT 19:00

NNNN

