

Place-based Arts Festivals in Hong Kong as extensions of civic space: A case study of the Sai
Kung Hoi Arts Festival

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Landscape Architecture

University of Washington

2024

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Landscape Architecture

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Abstract

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This paper examines how the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival in Hong Kong extends civic space by fostering social interactions, community engagement, and cultural exchange. The study uses qualitative methods, including site visits and interviews with festival curators, local villagers, volunteers, and visitors, to explore relational dynamics within the festival. The research finds that the festival enhances community ties and a sense of belonging, forming a budding civic network, but suggests that more community capacity-building initiatives are needed to sustain relationships and engagement beyond the festival. This research highlights the relational nature of civic space, showing how people's social interactions and emotional connections redefine physical spaces beyond their conventional understanding of containers and forms.

Preface/Acknowledgements

This thesis is the culmination of a journey that would not have been possible without the support and guidance of many individuals and institutions.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my committee chair, Jeff Hou, for his invaluable advice, encouragement, and insightful feedback throughout this process. I am also grateful to my committee member Manish Chalana for reviewing my work. Their expertise and support have been instrumental in shaping this work.

I am profoundly grateful to my family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout my graduate studies. Their patience, understanding, and belief in me have been a constant source of strength.

Thank you to the Landscape Architecture department for being a home for the past two years. I am grateful for the opportunities and support the department provided to me as a graduate student.

A special thank you goes to the curatorial team and the participants of this study, whose willingness to share their experiences and insights made this research possible. I am also grateful to the reviewers for their constructive critiques.

I am writing about Hong Kong at a time of great change. Instead of painting the city in a tragic light, I wanted to highlight and look at the people who are working to continue to make it a better place. Hong Kong will always be a fascinating place and a source of inspiration.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Amid citizens' rising awareness of improving the living environment through active participation and frustrations with the lack of quality public spaces in Hong Kong, various new forms of community engagement have been flourishing to address increasingly complex and interconnected social and built environment issues.

The thesis explores the practices of place-based "art festivals" in Hong Kong as a sprouting form of civic urbanism. The festival's growth reflects a need and yearn for more civic space. In this thesis, I explore the ways in which these art festivals may contribute to the production of civic space and public life.

Within the past decade, Hong Kong has seen a rise in the popularity of place-based "art festivals" initiated by community groups or state-backed organizations as tourism-based events. The growth is seen through both the increase in the number of these events and the increase in scale and popularity, thus generating a large amount of buzz in the cultural circle and beyond in Hong Kong. This growth coincides with a global proliferation of festivals, as contemporary arts festivals are found to be catalytic tools in combining economic, social, and cultural impact. Art projects, a term used to describe socially engaged public art projects in Japan with certain unique features, emerged in Japan in the 1980s(Kajiya, 2017). Art projects were further popularized by Fram Kitagawa, who founded the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in 2000 as a regional large-scale art festival event to revitalize regions in neighborhoods close to the exhibition site and tackle issues plaguing these areas, such as an aging population and low birth rates(Kumakura & The Art Project Research Group, 2015). Both the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial and the Setouchi Art Triennial gained a large amount of buzz in the art circle and beyond and are seen as effective tools for reviving the area by combining community-based art, tourism, and heritage preservation. Parallels could be drawn between the model of the art festival in Japan and the festivals happening in Hong Kong, that predominately uses art tourism to achieve certain revitalization objectives. This form of non-museum-based art festival is seen to be adapted to Hong Kong in 2013 on a much smaller scale, with a local group organizing the Ping Che Village School Art Festival. Since then, more art festival projects have occurred in Hong Kong organized by various

parties. These festivals have evolved to address more nuanced issues that extend beyond reviving economically declining villages and producing socially engaged art.

While these art festivals are in no way officially employed as planning and design tools, nor is placemaking or the facilitation of public space design explicitly stated as goals by the organizers, through the event and the investments or funding for the event, upgrades and changes to the public space or public environment in the place in which the art festivals are based in is often achieved as a result. The making of alternative public space and social relations outside a market-based economy can also be seen through the processes of the art festivals.

Viewing the place-based arts festivals in Hong Kong as a social and cultural phenomenon and opposing the idea of passive consumption, the explosion in its popularity can point to a particular yearning for civic space where people can directly participate in the social and political life of the city. Neoliberalism and the hegemony of private developers in Hong Kong have eroded the foundations of public life and civic space. In neoliberal Hong Kong, civil society and the remaining civic space that people have fought to protect are quickly diminishing due to further political crackdowns and growing intolerance toward political opposition in recent years. Social mobilizations against these trends are ultimately short-lived if they do not move beyond protest movements to generate social projects that create an inclusive public sphere and civic space. The growth of art festivals and active participation in art festivals can be read as an outgrowth of this understanding and an illustration of the ways people, by participating in an event, are also trying to expand the civic sphere for social and cultural life. Explorations into this form of civic urbanism and how these activities contribute to expanding civic space and alternative social relationships are needed to contextualize these new forms of cultural practices.

In light of this, a case study research design of a currently ongoing place-based art festival in Hong Kong is employed in this study to answer the following central research question and sub-questions:

How does the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival contribute to the formation of civic space?

- Who are the actors, and how do they perceive and engage with the festival?

- In what ways and processes does the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival impact civic spaces and public life?

Civic spaces are areas within our cities where diverse communities can engage in cultural practices and social interactions, free from governmental, commercial, or private dominance, fostering the growth of civil society. The presence of civic space enables citizens to partake in participatory urbanism, holding the transformative power to allow residents to reclaim and reinvent urban spaces. Civic spaces can be discussed from various disciplinary vantage points, but the focus of this research will be on the ability of diverse communities to form and engage in social interactions and cultural practices.

The design of the research is intended as a small-scale investigation into the social mechanisms of the art festivals. The chosen case, the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival, is currently the latest, largest in scale and popularity, and the longest recurring place-based art festival in Hong Kong. The fact that it is a government-backed tourism initiative allows the festival comparatively more access, resources, and reach compared to grassroots initiatives or endogenous festivals. Originating primarily as a government initiative aimed at boosting tourism, the festival is managed and curated by One Bite Design Studio, known for its emphasis on placemaking, community engagement, and social innovation. The case presents an opportunity to observe how an art festival combining top-down implementation and bottom-up initiatives to foster interaction and exchanges may potentially cultivate spaces for public discourse and engagement. Endogenous festivals or those with a heterogeneous makeup often have a more direct connection to civil society and civic space due to their inherent community roots and autonomy. However, the involvement of the state and state resources in the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival also provides a valuable perspective on how governmental forces, albeit more concerned with tourism and city image-making, may influence the cultural heritage preservation processes.

Given this context, the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival serves as a pertinent case study to explore whether and how art festivals can contribute to the creation of civic spaces, offering a platform for investigating the interplay between art, community, and civic engagement.

Given the complexity of the case study, qualitative methods are chosen to provide insights into how the different parties are involved and interact in the festival and its respective impacts on public life. Qualitative interviews are the main research method

employed in the study. I also draw on festival publicity material, such as catalogs, pamphlets, social media posts, and the festival website. Prior to the study, university ethical approval was obtained. Fieldwork was done from February to April 2024.

Qualitative Interviews were conducted with different parties representing:

1. The festival (curators)
2. The Participants (tourists, festival ambassadors, village community)

The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours. The interviewees were selected and invited to interview if they were involved in the festival in some way in the above roles. The festival ambassadors were contacted through the curators for individuals who were actively involved as volunteers in the most recent festival and were of different age groups. Members of the village community were also contacted through the introduction of the curators. One or two individuals were selected for each island, and they were chosen if they had been involved in the festival and were interested and available for the interview. The tourists were invited to be interviewed if they had been to the 2023 Sai Kung Hoi Art Festival in the capacity of a visitor. The following table summarizes the interviews, sampling methods, and sample sizes.

Group	Research method	Sampling method	Interviews conducted	Total interviewees
The curators	Focus group, semi-structured interview	Purposive sampling	1	4
volunteers (Festival ambassadors)	Individual semi-structured interview	Purposive sampling	4	4
Village community	Focus group or individual Semi-structured interview	Purposive sampling	4	6
Tourists	Individual semi-structured interview	Snowball sampling	4	4
		Total	13	18

Table 1-01 Summary of Interviews

The questions for the interview were designed to elicit responses to three main categories. The first group of questions is about engagement and social interactions that the festivals have brought about to the interviewee, whether they were able to form new relationships and connections or to initiate social interactions with various parties. The second group of questions concerns the impact of the festival on the interviewee's relationship and the place they were engaged with during the festival. The last group of questions concerns the interviewees' thoughts, discussion, and engagement with social or community issues of the islands involved in the festival.

The thesis is broken into six chapters. The first one is this introduction chapter, which aims to give an overview of the case and the case study research and introduce the methods and questions. The second chapter is a literature review that will explore what is written about the subject and provide a broad understanding of the proliferation of festivals, rural art-led initiatives, and literature about the established typology of Art Projects in Japan to gain an understanding of critiques and discussions surrounding art festivals. The third chapter is about arts festivals in Hong Kong and their relationship to civic space and civil society in terms of how festivals might expand and advance the ideals of civic space. The fourth chapter will present my investigation of various aspects of the case, Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival, to give an understanding of the festival's background, operation, and logistics. The fifth chapter will discuss findings and insights summarized from the investigation and qualitative interviews. The last chapter will include reflections and conclusions of the case study research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Proliferation of contemporary festivals

Since the late 1980s, arts and cultural festivals have been on the rise and now play a central role in the development of tourism and city policy-making (Olsen, 2013; Quinn, 2010; Shin, 2004). A robust and extensive body of international literature confirms the substantial effects that festivals have across economic, political, and socio-cultural spheres (Quinn, 2010). Key drivers to the proliferation of festivals have been their ability to yield development results related to economic restructuring and rejuvenation, rebranding of destinations, attracting inward investment, and generating tourism income. Combined with a series of interrelated factors such as changing urban management, structural changes in economic production, and the effects of globalization, contemporary festivals in various formats have been reconceptualized as a catalytic strategy to reposition and market a city on a global stage (Machotka, 2018; Quinn, 2010; Shin, 2004). For these reasons, public agencies have been increasingly active in endorsing and occasionally organizing arts festivals. Thus, arts festivals and other types of related events become used as part of a wider range of 'cultural strategies' for cities as a tool of economic growth (Quinn, 2005, 2010; Shin, 2004). As cities' interest in the festival lies mainly within the economic impact it can generate, public policy regarding festivals most commonly directly relates to tourism, place marketing, and economic growth (Geetz, 2009 as cited in Olsen, 2013).

The utilization of festivals as a tool for tourism, place marketing, and economic growth has contributed to the idea that contemporary festivals are of little social and cultural significance. The scarce social science material on contemporary festivals is dominated by a narrative of festivals guided by commercial interests and 'unauthentic' logics (Giorgi & Sassatelli, 2011). Often debates around the 'festivalisation' of cities have been negative, with several problems articulated. Harvey (1989) raised early concerns about the trend of cultural entrepreneurialism leading to an environment where the essence of culture is replaced by mere spectacle. This perspective sees festivals, celebrated for their spectacle, as valuable economic commodities for city managers. They are used to generate what Zukin (1995) describes as cultural capital, thereby making cities more attractive to investors and tourists. A significant portion of the critique focuses on how these cultural strategies often fail to resonate with the unique aspects of their locales. When site-specificity is ignored only to

create spectacle, homogenization occurs and limits the potential of meaningful civic engagement (Eisinger, 2000). Furthermore, festivals often must manage competing agendas between tourism needs and attending to the needs of many other key stakeholders (Quinn, 2010). The preoccupation with meeting visitor needs can lead to disregarding the needs of local residents (Eisinger, 2000). This viewpoint is supported by the fact that events may produce ways in which local life and local ways of living are disrupted or altered, causing locals to struggle to find meaning, a sense of identity, or connectedness to the event or place. In the context of global events such as biennales, a global platform where transnational standards are imposed on local art scenes while the local culture can insert its own discourses into the transnational, the emphasis on cultural differences may even transform locales into 'ethno-commodities' that facilitate 'consumption of authentic otherness' (Machotka, 2018).

However, the focus on narratives of modernization, commodification, and homogenization has led to a rather dichotomized debate around festivals. This discussion often centers on whether festivals can revitalize communities, whether they serve as sites for more open cultural politics, and whether their ties to tourism, commodification, and globalization inherently result in a loss of authenticity, uniqueness, and identity (Giorgi & Sassatelli, 2011). Just as traditional festivals are seen as insightful reflections of the societies they arise from, this perspective should also apply to contemporary festivals. These contemporary events, too, can be understood as mirrors of the societies they originate from, highlighting the complexities and characteristics of today's social landscapes.

Post-Tourist Gaze and Authenticity

Festivals as markers of social and cultural life, have been absorbed into the expansive stock of 'products' that tourists desire (Picard & Robinson, 2006). As contemporary festivals have become inherently entangled with tourism, a significant portion of its critique deals with the concept of "tourist gaze" and the effects it has on the destination. Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" refers to the way tourists view the places and cultures they visit through preconceived notions and expectations shaped by media, culture, and the tourism industry itself (Urry, 2002). According to Urry, this gaze is not neutral or purely personal but is constructed and influenced by societal norms and expectations, which determine what is

deemed worthy of attention and appreciation in a destination. It plays a crucial role in the commodification of culture and nature, as destinations are marketed and modified to fit the desires and expectations of tourists, often leading to staged authenticity and environmental impacts(Urry, 2002). This highlights the complex interplay between tourists, the tourism industry, and local cultures, underscoring the power dynamics and cultural exchanges that define the tourism experience.

Urry, however, also notes that the tourist gaze varies over time and across different social groups, reflecting changes in societal values, technologies, and the tourism market. In his later work with Larsen, he argues for the emergence of the post-tourist, who is more ironic and self-reflexive in their approach to travel, engaging with destinations in a way that is aware of the constructed nature of tourist experiences (Urry & Larsen, 2011). This perspective suggests that some modern tourists resist or play with the traditional tourist gaze, seeking more authentic and individualized experiences. This will have implications for contemporary festivals, as organizers must think more deeply about the way they interact with the local in pursuit of creating an authentic experience.

With the rise of digital technology and social media, some researchers also explore how the tourist gaze is mediated through digital platforms. Tourists now often encounter and engage with destinations through online images, reviews, and virtual experiences before and after actual travel, reshaping the nature of the tourist gaze in the digital age. While this has many effects, one is enabling a raised awareness on the part of the tourists. The tourist can be more aware of their impacts and the impact travel has on a place and thus become much more conscious of their actions.

Contrary to the somewhat passive view of tourists in Urry's tourist gaze, other scholars emphasize the co-creation or co-construction of tourist experiences between tourists and locals. This perspective recognizes the active role of local communities and tourists in shaping tourism experiences, often in ways that are more collaborative and less exploitative. The shaping of experiences goes both ways, in which the tourist perspective or gaze also shapes local thought. In an ethnography study of the Echigo-Tsumari Triennale, Klien pointed out that Triennale tourism has had the effect of consolidating local identity, as it provides community members with a chance to contemplate and appreciate the appeal of their region. (Klien, 2010).

These arguments illustrate the changing nature of modern tourism and call for a more nuanced understanding of the social relationships inherent in these events. The emergence of the post-tourist, alongside the growing influence of digital technology on travel experiences, signifies a departure from the traditional, one-dimensional view of tourists as merely passive consumers. Today's tourists, with their complex motivations and heightened awareness of their impacts, engage with destinations and local cultures in ways that are more reflexive, authentic, and conscious. This shift not only challenges the conventional tourist gaze but also underscores the potential for collaborative and mutually beneficial interactions between tourists and local communities. Further research is needed into the web of social relationships fostered by festivals to better understand and leverage these interactions in a way that enriches both the visitor experience and local identity. This deeper exploration can provide valuable insights into creating more sustainable, authentic, and engaging festival experiences that reflect the multifaceted nature of modern tourism.

Festival Practice and Social Change

Scholars have argued that festivals provide opportunities for expressing local identities and have traditionally been occasions for local stakeholders to engage and shape their specific environments (Picard & Robinson, 2006; Turner et al., 1982). Discussion around the features of festival practice reveals how they can spark social change.

Festivities often include different forms of staged and non-staged performances and enactments. These performances and enactments serve as expressions with different meanings allowing people to project 'images of themselves and their worlds to their audiences' (Palmer & Jankowiak, 1996 as cited by Picard & Robinson, 2006). The creation of the spectacular within a festival is a crucial means of social expression, serving to emphasize and celebrate identity and communal spirit. Often, the tourist 'becomes' part of, and is changed through, the festival (Picard & Robinson, 2006). By expressing a set of identities, individuals and groups can manifest their visions of the place and the world and create meaningful frameworks of being together. In other words, they offer avenues for exploring and establishing being, belonging, and meaning in the world.

Festivals utilize, create, and transform social spaces. The temporary reshaping, and in some cases reversal, of space and its uses is what Turner (1982) sees as liminality, moments

(time), and places (space) of ambiguity where norms and realities are put on hold. This liminal condition is a time and space where genuine creativity can be inspired and exercised. In this context, festivals emerge as unique hubs for cultural creativity, where communities have the opportunity to innovate in response to social crises, introduce new economic models, and forge new symbols of identity and meaning. Creativity, in this scenario, is seen both as the ability to develop symbolic responses and alternatives to prevailing situations and as a dynamic process that can instigate change, potentially transforming existing conditions.

The dismissive account of contemporary festivals fails to consider them as significant as traditional festivals. As liminal and playful spaces, they are filled with possibilities for challenging social convention, order, and cultural norms in search of new potential (Olsen, 2013).

Arts festivals in rural communities

The shift from using festivals as a catalyst in urban areas and cities to rural areas has also emerged as a trend. Literature regarding rural revitalization through art and cultural programming has also been examined.

Since the 2000s, arts-led initiatives have expanded from urban areas to rural areas, where they have taken a role in revitalizing rural communities across the world via art festivals, biennials, and triennials (K. Y. Leung & Thorsen, 2022). A significant challenge for rural areas is their decline and discrepancy in development in relation to their urban counterpart. Scholars have suggested that this rural-urban divide is symptomatic of late capitalism and is a result of global processes and a move towards neoliberal ideology in many developed nations (Anwar McHenry, 2009; Qu & Cheer, 2021). Much like their urban counterpart, these events or initiatives are seen as novel revitalization policies with untapped potential for economic and social impact. Researchers have explored the phenomenon of arts-led initiatives from varied disciplinary angles. Social science research has studied and recognized the economic gains and the social benefits of these initiatives (Anwar McHenry, 2009; Anwar-McHenry et al., 2018; Koizumi, 2016), as well as its role in facilitating sustainable development (Qu, 2020; Qu & Cheer, 2021).

On the other hand, arts and cultural studies research have dealt with art's potential in forging participation, building relationships, and establishing local autonomy (Anwar McHenry, 2009; Crawshaw & Gkartzios, 2016; Klien, 2010). It is suggested that arts' concern with meaning and value makes them stand out from other forms of participation because of who they engage and the quality of that engagement (Matarasso, 1997 as cited in Anwar McHenry, 2009). In a study of an art festival in Ireland, Crawshaw & Gkartzios (2016) recognizes how art practices can mediate between participants and facilitate interactions, allowing people to become part of a network of community relationships. Anwar-McHenry (2009) further argues that engaging in the arts can be considered both a social and civic participation. Participation in the arts can be in the form of recreation in a public space or as a group activity. It can also be utilized as a means of engagement in civic activities, not only as political statements or protests to raise awareness of certain issues but also as a way to involve the community in developing innovative and cooperative solutions (Anwar McHenry, 2009).

Hallmarks of Place-based art festivals in East Asia

In line with the trend of rural revitalization using art-led initiatives, Since the 2000s, there has been an emergence of contemporary art festivals across East Asia that emphasize its connection to the place, environment, and community while experiencing art and culture through the festival (Yeung, 2019). These festivals are usually held in depopulated rural areas, with artwork exhibited in a variety of spaces in local towns and villages across a large geographical area. These festivals happen under recurring formats such as biennials or triennials. Prolific examples include the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in Niigata, Japan, and the Setouchi Triennale in the Seto Inland Sea, Japan. While referred to by different names in respective regions (大地藝術祭 in Japan, 地景藝術節 in Taiwan, 藝術節 in Hong Kong), these festivals typically display the same characteristic of the concurrent use of multiple sites which viewers independently navigate to see temporarily installed artworks at various locations, with a variety of other activities and festivities held in conjunction with the display of artworks during the festival period. The duration of these festivals has typically shown a stronger interest in unraveling the history and social context of the local area.

Termed regional 'art projects' in Japan, the ever-increasing number of international art festivals organized by prefectures or large cities as a means to promote art tourism in Japan is among the highest profile 'art projects' (Kumakura & The Art Project Research Group, 2015). The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, led by art director Fram Kitagawa, marked a significant milestone for art projects, drawing over 160,000 visitors in its first edition in 2000. At a time when contemporary art exhibitions struggled to gain financial support, ten thousand visitors were considered a success for an art event. The unexpected surge in popularity of this festival took both the art community and the wider public by surprise. They became a prototype for many subsequent festivals. The success of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (2000-) and the Setouchi Triennale (2010-), also directed by Fram Kitagawa, prompted a wave of large-scale art festivals organized by local governments throughout Japan. (Kajiya, 2017). A few characteristics of these art festivals are noteworthy. In contrast to urban festivals that are usually contained and gated, these rural festivals take place over vast geographical areas, usually requiring three to seven days to see its entirety. While the locations for the artworks are varied, they intentionally make use of areas beyond conventional cultural venues (like museums, galleries, and concert halls), including alternative spaces, deserted downtown areas, unoccupied traditional Japanese homes, vacant storefronts, unused schools, and outdoor spaces like parks and fields (Kumakura & The Art Project Research Group, 2015). Another hallmark is its ability to attract not just art fans but also the general public. (Kumakura & The Art Project Research Group, 2015).

The social role of art festivals

The social turn in contemporary art has emphasized the tendency for socially engaged art practices to strengthen civil society by transforming public spaces into sites of dialogue and exchange through collaborative methods. Discourses in art have focused on examining the social role and its social engagement through the lens of socially engaged art. While art projects in Japan are not the focus of this thesis, the discourses in art critique shed light on the attitudes towards social engagement in place-based art festivals in East Asia as a lineage from the regional art festivals in Japan owing to their similarity in design and mindset.

In Kamaura's comprehensive study of art projects in Japan, she highlights the social role of art projects by emphasizing its "interest and engagement with social fields outside art" as one of its distinguishing features(Kumakura & The Art Project Research Group, 2015). However, she does not parallel Japanese art projects with socially engaged art in other countries. Instead, she highlights a major difference in the way art projects engage with the society. While the enthusiasm for involvement could stem from a mutual interest among both the general public and artists in fostering new avenues for dialogue and initiating novel forms of activity beyond established value systems, she points out how the framing of social issues is rarely explicit or confrontational. She attributes this tendency to the particular political climate in Japan that is characterized by "an aversion to discussing politics in Japan and a desire to maintain an equivocal attitude toward political and civic movements" (Kumakura & The Art Project Research Group, 2015). The lack of a critical approach in art projects often becomes a point of critique itself among academics from both Japan and the West(Yeung, 2019).

Kajiya(2017) attributes the weak social awareness and lack of critical approach in art projects to current legislative conditions and forms of financial and institutional support. These projects ultimately face limitations and constraints due to their dependence on financial support from local governments and corporate grants, for which they must consistently apply for. Kajiya criticized their aversion from critical topics as "compromising for the sake of continuous execution". Kamakura (2015), however, maintains that instead of connecting with more radical citizens, the art projects aim at working with the majority of people whose social awareness is less informed or those with a "nebulously reformist attitude" to explore the unexpressed or unease within society by deeply engaging with others (Kumakura & The Art Project Research Group, 2015). The aversion is seen as an intentional way to connect and build a relationship with the audience.

In Yeung's article tracing the origins of Japanese art projects outside of a Eurocentric framework, Yeung further elaborates on how art projects prioritize relational dynamics, whether it's among cultures, between individuals and society, or between humanity and nature, in contrast to Western art history's focus on the clear distinction between subject and object(Yeung, 2019). This focus on relationalism highlights the interconnections

between subject and object, fostering a kind of intersubjectivity. Kumakura thus posits that this behavior of art projects reflects a trait inherent to East Asia.

The exploration of the social role of art festivals, particularly through the lens of art projects in Japan, illuminates a nuanced approach to social engagement within the context of East Asian cultural and political landscapes. These art initiatives distinguish themselves by fostering interactions that extend beyond the traditional confines of the art world, delving into broader social fields with a focus on communal and environmental interconnectedness. Moreover, the apparent aversion to overt political discourse within these projects emerges not as a dismissal of civic engagement but as a pragmatic survival tactic. It allows art projects to navigate the delicate socio-political climates of East Asia, engaging with the community in a manner that is less confrontational. This strategic approach seeks to draw in a wider audience to partake in a dialogue that, while not explicitly political, contributes to a collective reflection and understanding of societal issues. Hence, despite the critiques of a lack of critical approach or political awareness, the model presented here may manifest a unique blend of social engagement and civic participation.

Despite the social turn and focus on relationships in socially engaged art festivals as a revitalization mechanism, the focus of research has been on art theory or aesthetics. Sociologists have called for scholars to examine the real, local impacts experienced by the community, as the focus on the influences and consequences of this mode of a growing trend of regional revitalization through art will offer policymakers a more detailed understanding of how art, local populations, tourists, and neighboring communities intersect. This, in turn, will enable more effective planning and decision-making. Qu(2019), who has researched art and community relationships in the Setouchi Art Triennale, has suggested that research on socially engaged rural art festivals should not be limited to the art itself but should also consider the social impact and outcomes of the art festival on the island community as a relational outcome for the island. This necessitates a broader relational approach that takes into account the evolving dynamics of island communities, nature, landscapes, artworks, festival tourism, and social interactions among artists, tourists, and the community within an extended relational creative geographical framework(Qu, 2019).

Challenges facing art festivals in Japan

While discussing social role of art festivals in Japan, it is important to note that they are still very much subject to the competing agendas and the tension of contemporary festivals. The biennial or triennial is usually considered a unique platform of cross-cultural artistic exchange where transnational standards are imposed on local art scenes while the local culture can insert its own discourses into the transnational conversation (Machotka, 2018). Cities use biennales or triennials to seek to be nationally or internationally significant by putting forward supposedly unique characteristics and establishing their city positioning. Festivals that are positioned as an art biennale/triennale are where the tension between the global and local is brought to the forefront. The difficult aspect of these discussions between worldwide and local contexts lies in overcoming the entrenched power dynamics among different places and their corresponding knowledge systems (Machotka, 2018).

As an example, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Festival has had to respond to a growing number of conflicting agendas from many stakeholders, including the local community, local governments, art establishments, and the growing number of urbanites and audiences who visit the festival. The festival has initially established a conceptual framework surrounding human beings as part of nature and *Satoyama*, a socio-ecological production landscape that lies in the intermediate zone between the forest and the city. The emphasis on the 'interaction' between human and non-human elements in *Satoyama* became a guiding concept for the festival, indigenous and unique to its national and cultural context. Various artists have created artwork according to the framework and its emphasis on human-nature interactions embedded in the concept of *Satoyama*. However, owing to the need to generate economic income through popular appeal, popular "object" based artwork that sports picturesque qualities produced by iconic celebrity artists, such as Emilia Kabakov, Yayoi Kusuma, James Turrell, have become vital to the operation of the festival and the draw of tourists. The high-profile artworks are highly visible and play a significant part in the festival's commercial success, but are often deemed out of place and inauthentic for locals that do not relate or reflect their rural realities (K. Y. Leung & Thorsen, 2022). Nonetheless, Leung and Thorsen's study suggests that these interactions with the artworks have spurred farmers' own reflections on their practices in relation to their environment

The festival, in its effort to attract national, regional, and international art audiences to the Niigata countryside, has faced criticism on various fronts, including imposing out-of-place artworks. However, there is actually a wide range of artistic explorations by farmers, villagers, and thinkers that are well noted and cataloged in the guidebooks. For every piece of art by big names, there are more installations by local people and non-professionals. Fram Kitagawa, director of the festival, noted in his book that it is his ambition through the festival to “engage with local people around the natural environment that they contend with daily.” (Kitagawa, 2015) The same study by Leung (K. Y. Leung & Thorsen, 2022) of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Festival notes the sheer diversity in reaction towards the high-profile artworks versus what she calls ‘marginal art’ in the festival. The locals experience a much greater affinity with those that create ‘marginal art’, which merges with daily life, agriculture cycles, and local experiences.

Ultimately, festivals that aim to revitalize must grapple with the reality and the challenge of reflecting their local objectives while remaining competitive. While recognizing that the Triennale framework does evoke forgotten landscapes to direct attention to the countryside, Klein (2010) argues that revitalization is only sustainable if incentives are created for residents to establish local autonomy. The festival has the potential to boost the recognition of a formerly obscure region and offer locals the chance to interact with visitors; however, ways must be found to encourage deeper participation of the community, grounded in their desire for self-reliance (Klein, 2010). Mere romanticization and fantasy of the countryside cannot be translated into a credible future concerning the social and economic reality of the region.

Conclusion

To conclude, the literature review reveals the multifaceted roles contemporary festivals play in urban and rural development, economic growth, and cultural expression, driven by economic restructuring, rebranding, and tourism. The evolution of the “tourist gaze” towards more authentic experiences underscores the need for a renewed understanding of contemporary festivals beyond the focus of its critique on issues of commercialization and homogenization. Festivals can, in fact, instigate social change and are an important avenue

for local expression. Rural art festivals aimed at revitalization, particularly in Japan, have shown potential for revitalization and community engagement. Nonetheless, they face challenges in balancing local-global contexts and fostering genuine local involvement. Gaps in knowledge are present given the focus on either art theory or success in revitalization of these festivals. These insights highlight the need for further research on the impacts and outcomes of the site-specific, socially engaged art festivals on the community to understand how site-specific art festivals can effectively contribute to communities through the activities and social interactions they form.

Chapter 3: Place-based Art Festivals and Civic Space in Hong Kong

Place-based Arts Festival – potential formation of civic spaces?

Douglass, Ho and Ooi (2008) define civic spaces as ‘the various types of life spaces in which civil society finds room to create cultural practices in community lifeworlds’. It refers to spaces of social inclusion in which state and private economy are kept at a distance from dominating the production and reproduction of culture. It is a place in which people of different origins and walks of life can co-mingle without overt control by the government, commercial or other private interests, or de facto dominance by one group over another (Douglass et al., 2008). Civic spaces can support and maintain specific social interactions that help build and employ social capital, serving as tangible locations for social interactions and community life within urban areas (Daniere and Douglass, 2009). Danielle and Douglass (2009) maintain that without civic spaces, civil society cannot grow and flourish.

Civic space is a realm where citizens can partake in participatory urbanism, holding the transformative power to enable residents to reclaim and reinvent urban spaces. (Cho, Križnik, and Hou, 2022). Cho, Križnik, and Hou (2022) terms civic urbanism as the combined capacity of citizens and civil society to become engaged in the production of civic space to influence and modify the living environment on their terms. While the formation of civic space is often a product of voluntary and autonomous collective action, scholars have noted the historic role the state has had in shaping associational life and citizen participation in Asia, and thus, the production of civic space does not preclude collaboration with the state (Hou et al., 2022). It should be recognized, though, that these spaces are not free from power dynamics and can be utilized to extend neoliberal governance instead of strengthening civil society. It should also be considered that civic spaces can exist physically and conceptually where civil society groups create shared norms and values on their own terms, but such norms and values may still involve hierarchical power structures characterized by control and surveillance (Daniere & Douglass, 2009).

While the definition of civic space is an analytically useful one, the tensions between theory and practice are recognized. Case studies often suggest a more nuanced reading and conceptualization of civic space. It is important to highlight that civic space does not mean that they are totally free of state or capital interests. Douglass, Ho, and Ooi (2008) identify types of civic spaces even within commercial establishments such as coffee shops, bathhouses, and pubs, or public establishments. The emphasis is that these are spaces that are inclusive and open to a broad spectrum of civil society, whether public or private (Douglass et al., 2008). They are “open spaces” in which anyone and everyone has the right to access and the right to initiate contact with each other.

The increasing importance of 'events,' including the spread of festivals and other cultural events used by groups in civil society, is getting more attention in the literature (Citroni, 2020). While there have been studies focusing on the participatory dimension of the events, it has not been articulated in relation to civic space. The longer time span, recurring occurrence, and socially engaged tendencies of the art festivals lend to the potential for it to be considered in relation to the production of civic space.

With reference to the above articulation around festivals, their ability to instigate social change, and the potential of art in forging participation, building relationships, and establishing local autonomy, it could be argued that contemporary place-based art festivals have the potential to produce and form civic spaces. Contemporary place-based art festivals hold the potential to create civic spaces through several key mechanisms. The fact that they cover a vast geographic area and are often non-gated enables opportunities for different people to participate in various different ways. These festivals offer a platform for diverse community participation and interaction and introducing or allowing different people to come together and potentially form stronger relationships that can maintain associational life or specific social interactions. The creation of a liminal space where conventional norms and realities are temporarily suspended creates an environment that may enable communities to break daily practices and explore new collective solutions and approaches to societal challenges. As communal focal points, art festivals encourage discourse and collaboration among various stakeholders, contributing to the development of a collective identity and a sense of community spirit. This process helps to cultivate a sense of ownership and agency among citizens, fostering connections within the community. Furthermore, in an era where

local identities are often threatened by homogenization, given the participation of different parties, art festivals can become vital platforms for the expression of local concerns and values. The setting may stimulate civic dialogue that enables communities to address issues that are significant to them or the community.

Through these dynamics, contemporary art festivals can be understood as contributing to the formation of civic spaces, supporting the growth and vitality of civil society by emphasizing participation, collaboration, and the sustenance of local identity.

Civil society and civic space in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the prevalence of pro-development agendas has resulted in citizens having a very limited role in urban governance. After the handover in 1997, Hong Kong continued to position itself as an international finance center with a free market economy. As a result, neoliberal policies have prevailed and led to the increasing privatization of public space and reduced role of the public sector in all aspects of society. Redevelopment authorities have been involved in taking over properties for developers and demolishing entire neighborhoods, erasing spaces of daily life and shared memories.

Citizen movements emerged since 2006 through resistance against the demolition of historic landmarks, attempts to reclaim public space and the eviction of communities for proposed infrastructure projects(Hou et al., 2022). Protests against the demolition of the Star Ferry Terminal in 2006 and the Queen's Pier coincided with a growing local cultural identity. Protests and performance art attempts also took place at Times Square, Causeway Bay in 2008 against the nature of privately-owned public space and the privatization of public spaces(P. S. A. Leung, 2015). The movements spread from the city to countryside areas that were facing eviction from the proposed development. Alongside the Anti Express Rail Link movement in 2009-2010, resistance movements and struggles to protect Choi Yuen Village in the New Territories raised awareness and sparked rethinking of the future of rural development in the New Territories. Civil society flourished alongside the citizen movement.

Relevant to the discussion here is the concept of 'protestivals' that were part of global movements to reclaim the public space, and also an element in the movements in Hong Kong. Protestivals are generally short-term events that prioritize creativity over long-

term, transformative resistance(Chen & Szeto, 2017). They often exist in a gray area between protest and carnival. The movements in Hong Kong present a hybrid that combines not only long-term occupations and resistance but also vibrant carnivalesque actions and utopian imagination(Chen & Szeto, 2017). While protestivals can lean heavily towards either creativity or resistance, they nonetheless demonstrate that short-term actions or interventions to spark creativity or celebration are crucial elements in creating or sustaining change. Consequently, protestivals, or the 'festival' elements within movements, often sustain civic space by encouraging expression, conviviality, and collective imagination.

Beyond political resistance

The end of the anti-ELAB protests and the current political crackdown marks a major turning point for the active civil society in Hong Kong. Along with the growing intolerance towards political opposition and the passing of authoritarian laws such as the National Security Law and Article 23, civil society is significantly hampered.

Despite the setback, citizens are finding their ways to continue to participate in civic engagements and public life. Similar to other social movements that fail to reach their goal, participants continue their pursuits through new strategies. The increasing failure of the government to alleviate tensions and the unavailability of channels to express opinions prompts civil society to explore new approaches for shaping relations between the state and society, moving beyond the traditional model of citizenship. While political resistance constitutes one form of civic activism, the overall emphasis is shifting onto cultural and social resilience through civic engagement brought about by insurgent and propositional advocacy for societal change in Hong Kong through varied, and also apolitical, sites and activities (Valjakka, 2020). This tendency was observed in the post-Umbrella Movement era and in the current post-Anti-ELAB protests era. Despite a potentially more repressive political climate than before, civil society is exploring alternative ways to shape state-society interactions and reimagine the urban landscape. These efforts by diverse communities to rethink the city, extending beyond specific urban areas, contributing to developing more sophisticated forms of urban resilience that encompass cultural and social activities.

Place-based Art Festivals in Hong Kong

The success of the international art festivals in Japan has arguably also influenced the adoption of this type of event in other East Asian countries, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, as a catalyst for revitalization. Small and mid-scale art festivals have grown to over 365 events per year in different cities and villages in Japan. (Yeung, 2017).

In Hong Kong, the rural art festival format was first taken up as a grassroots initiative and organized by local NGOs. This form of non-museum place-based art festival in rural areas is seen to be adapted to Hong Kong in 2013 on a much smaller scale, with a local group organizing the 1st Emptyscape art festival: Ping Che Village School Art Festival. A total of 2,300 people participated in the four-day event (Zheng et al., n.d.). The social context at the time that Emptyscape was founded was when there was a lot of controversy over the development plan of the Northeastern New Territories in Hong Kong. The government has released plans in the Policy Address to initiate new town developments in the Northeastern New Territories countryside. Protests by residents broke out, and researchers questioned why the government had not chosen to develop idle government land or brownfield sites up to 3000 hectares but instead chose to develop countryside areas with villages and lively communities. Earlier events organized by Emptyscape have addressed the development plans and land concerns in the Northeastern New Territories through a soft approach, responding to and raising awareness for the development concerns through art, music, and public discourse.

The organizers happen to come across Ping Che and the disused school building through a guided tour of Ping Che by villagers. They thought the school and Ping Che were very attractive and had much potential for regeneration. Emptyscape has previously dealt with events in idle and empty spaces and has emphasized that the "imagination must connect with the community" in terms of the ways to reuse the space. After various community-building efforts and art initiatives with enthusiastic villagers, they organized the first Ping Che Village School Art Festival, in which 16 artworks were created around the former Ping Che Village School with a plethora of other activities such as performances, football matches, a forum on land and country schools, workshops, guided tours, and movie screening. It was mentioned by the organizers that the festival was inspired by the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in Japan, and the art exhibition aims to reflect on the relationship

between urban and rural areas and discuss alternative development models through artistic creation(Zheng et al., n.d.) The villagers were actively involved in many of these activities.

It could be seen how the festival model is used as a ‘softer’ approach by community groups to spark creativity and address larger development issues. Subsequently, various parties have used the same model to organize art festival projects in various rural areas of Hong Kong, addressing more nuanced issues that extend beyond reviving economically declining villages. The table below summarizes the attempts, their location, funding party, and organizer.

Year	Festival Name	Location	Funding	Organizer or Curator
2013, 2016	Emptyscape Art Festival	Ping Che	Arts Development Council (ADC)	Emptyscape (independent grassroots organization)
2018	Hi! Hill Chuen Lung Village Public Art Project	Chuen Lung Village, Tsuen Wan	Arts Promotion Office (APO)	Make a Difference Institute & APO
2018,2019	Outdoor Festival Shalowan Series	Shalowan Village, Lantau Island	HKSAR Government Springboard Grant of Arts Capacity Development Funding Scheme	The Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection Company (AFTEC, A registered charity)
2019,2020,2021	Yim Tin Tsai Art Festival (Pilot project of Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival)	Yim Tin Tsai	Hong Kong Tourism Commission	Hulu Culture
2021, 2023	Interisland Festival	Peng Chau, Mui Wo, Chi Ma Wan and Cheung Chau	Design Trust, C.C. Wu Cultural and Education Foundation Fund & Crowdfunding	Individual islanders (Myriem Alnet Chan Chun-kit Yip Kai-Chun)
2022,2023, 2024(to be held)	Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival	Kau Sai Chau, Sharp Island, High Island, and Yim Tin Tsai	Hong Kong Tourism Commission	One Bite Design Studio

Table 3-01 Place-based art festivals in Hong Kong

The map below shows where they are located geographically.

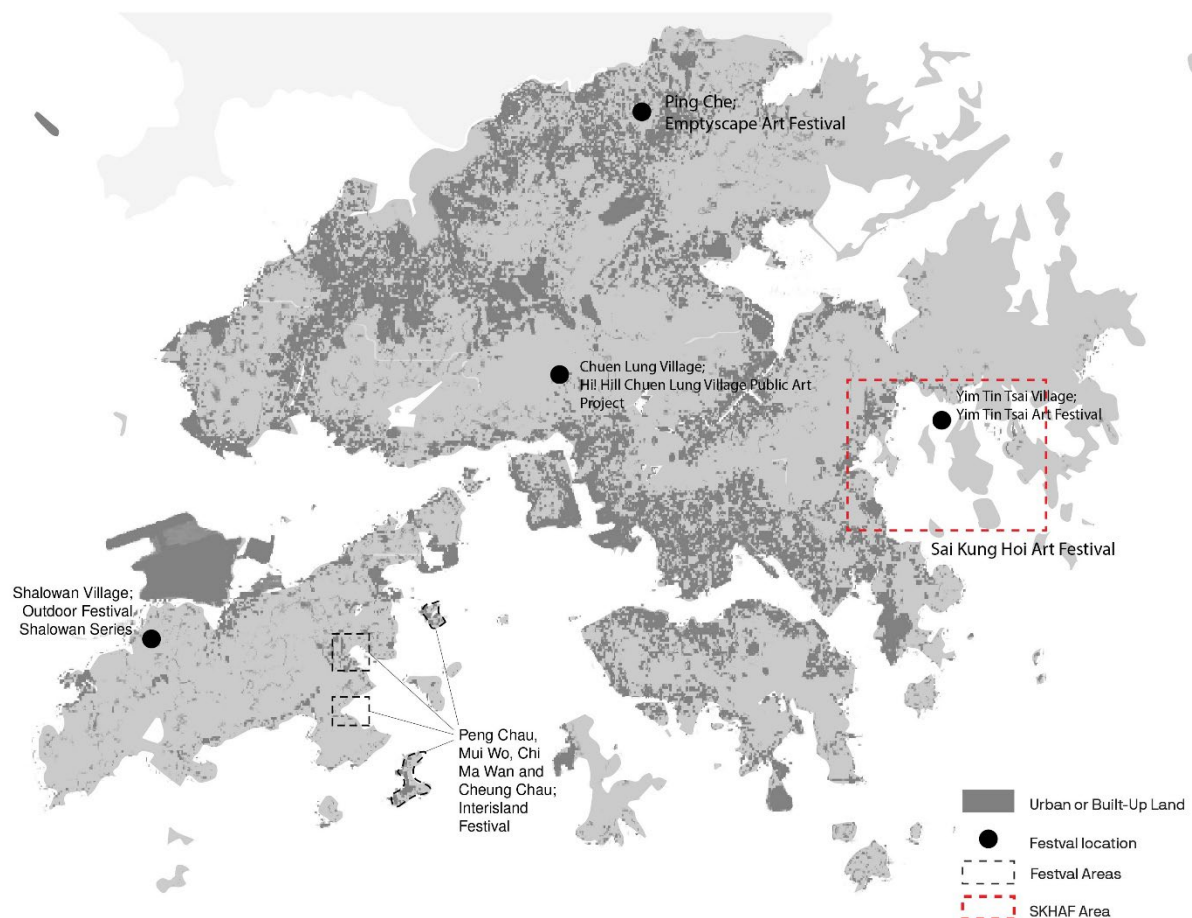


Figure 3-02 Location of place-based art festivals in Hong Kong

In the policy address in 2018, the government announced allocating 3.96million HKD to the Hong Kong Tourism Commission towards the development of the Yim Tin Tsai Art Festival as an ecotourism project, making explicit references to the Setouchi Triennale model(Stand News, 2018). It was meant to be a three-year pilot project to test the model with the possibility of expanding. It was the first attempt by the local government to promote tourism through the adoption of a recurring art festival, with a focus on promoting Hakka culture and history along with the natural landscapes of the area. The subsequent Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival, which is the continuation of the Yim Tin Tsai Art Festival pilot project, is the largest place-based art festival in Hong Kong in scale to date. However, in comparison, the scale of the art festivals in Hong Kong is nowhere near that of Japan's Setouchi or Echigo-Tsumari Triennale, which sports over 200+ artworks in its most recent edition. Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival has 18 artworks in its latest edition.

As pointed out in the literature review section, scholars who have researched art and community relationships in Japan have suggested that socially engaged rural art festivals should be studied and considered for their actual social impact and outcomes in the communities they are based in (Qu, 2019). It necessitates a broader relational approach that takes into account the evolving dynamics of island communities, nature, landscapes, artworks, festival tourism, and social interactions among artists, tourists, and the community within an extended relational creative geographical framework (Qu, 2019). The thesis, therefore, proposes place-based contemporary art festivals in Hong Kong as a unit of observation for the continued production of civic space.

In conclusion, this chapter highlighted the linkage between festivals and the formation of civic space. Tracing civil society and civic space in Hong Kong, the historical context of Hong Kong's urban governance revealed that citizens had limited roles in shaping their environment. The discussion of civic movements shows a trend to protect growing local identity and how short-term, festive interventions played a role in creating and maintaining civic engagement. As seen after the crackdown of the latest protest movements and shrinking civil society, emphasis has been shifting to cultural and social resilience. In line with this trend, there is a growing interest in using art festivals as a soft approach to gaining awareness and addressing social issues. Contemporary place-based art festivals offer an alternative and complementary avenue for civic engagement. These festivals can serve as vital platforms for social cohesion, cultural exchange, and community building, highlighting the evolving nature of civic space in Hong Kong.

Chapter 4: Case Study: Background of the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival

Building on the understanding of civic space and the potential of art festivals to form and build civic space, the following chapter delves into a specific case study, the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival, to explore the festival's role in fostering civic space through community relations and engagement. This festival, which involves both top-down planning and bottom-up engagement, provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics of civic space from a community relations perspective. The chapter will explore the background and setup of the festival, focusing on understanding the actors and relationships within the festival. Exploring how the festival may engage with community dynamics and how different actors perceive and engage with the festival will set the stage for our discussion on how the festival impacts civic space from a relational perspective.

Festival Overview

Festival period in 2023:	2023 Nov 15- 2024 Jan 14
Mode:	Non-ticketed and non-gated, free activities
Location:	Sai Kung City and 4 Islands in Sai Kung Area

Statistics for the 2nd Edition of the festival in 2023

2023 Number of artworks:	18
2023 Number of participating islands:	4
	- Yim Tin Tsai - Sharp Island - Kau Sai Chau - High Island
2023 Number of participating villages:	6
	- Yim Tin Tsai Village - Kau Sai Village - Tung A Village - Pak A Village - Pak Lap Village - Sha Kiu Village
2023 Number of visitors:	71,000+
2023 Number of Festival Ambassadors:	150+

2023 Number of Village Ambassadors: 40+

The Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival (SKHAF) is a three-year arts initiative organized by the Tourism Commission, with support from the Hong Kong Geopark and curation by One Bite Design Studio. At the core of the festival is a network of site-specific installations by Hong Kong artists and architects. In 2023, the festival featured 18 artworks across four islands in the Sai Kung Peninsula: Yim Tin Tsai, Sharp Island, Kau Sai Chau, and High Island, along with other events and programs.

Festival Aim

The festival's aim can be said to be two-fold. The first is to use the medium of contemporary art and the festival to discover and heighten the attractiveness of the region. As described in the curator's message on the festival's website and the festival's press release:

Hong Kong, formed by islands, has evolved our unique culture, religions, geology, and social practices in harmony with nature. Art, as a medium, is a reflection of our lives which brings us on a journey of discovery and healing(About the Festival, n.d.).

The remaining ten artworks are newly installed, and are inspired by conversations, stories, and materials derived from the Sai Kung islands, making them channels of communication of the hidden narratives of the land (Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival 2023 Press Release, n.d.).

Second, on the basis of this 'discovery,' the festival aims to utilize art and the festival as a driver to increase the influx of visitors to the islands, revitalizing them to a certain extent similar to the concept of an 'open museum' or 'eco-museum.'

The Arts Festival will diversify the tourism offerings and enrich local and non-local visitors' experience, blending the rich history, local culture, heritage and natural environment of Sai Kung Hoi with Hong Kong's creativity and arts atmosphere(About the Festival, n.d.).

The event aims to showcase the natural, historical, and cultural attributes of these islands, transforming the area into an “open museum” (About the Festival, n.d.).

Festival Model

The marketing of the festival often includes framing the journey to the islands as healing and an experience of harmony with nature, which is clearly aimed at urban visitors. The rhetoric of a healing journey to the rural islands and romanticization of island life in harmony with nature is a common theme among rural festivals and presents these regional attractions as the opposite of what urban residents experience in their everyday environments.

The appeal to urban visitors, however, is not all there is to the story. Studies show a connection between regional revitalization, spreading information about the area, and attracting short or long-term visitors. While it is widely acknowledged that tourism is closely tied to revitalization, studies of rural areas in Japan have shown that sustaining revitalization through purely tourism strategies has rarely succeeded in achieving long-lasting results (Klien, 2010). Additionally, previous research on the effects of the festival has shown that collaboration between locals, artists, and volunteers has a greater impact than the interactions between visitors and local residents (Klien, 2010). The curators of the festival also recognized the significance of fostering connections between visitors and the local community, therefore describing a ‘high level of community involvement’ as a core to the festival (*Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival 2023 Press Release*, n.d.).

The following are three key areas in the festival where the concept of social interaction and community engagement are seen to be pursued.

1) Production of the artwork

Festival marketing often emphasizes the supposedly inextricable connection between the artworks and the communities and environments that host them. Such artworks emphasize local identities and their “site-specific” characteristics. Curators of site-specific art typically request that artists create their artworks in consideration of the

local community and culture(Qu, 2019). In the case of SKHAF, the curators have pointed out that they have facilitated interaction between the artists and the local community, but the level of engagement ultimately depends on the artist. Artists typically spend anywhere from a few days to a few weeks on-site, with highly varied levels of community engagement, participation, and input. In some cases, village community members have assisted in creating the artwork.

2) Large-scale participation of both urban volunteers and volunteers from the village community

The festival has created two programmed roles, the Festival Ambassadors and Village Ambassadors, to facilitate the large-scale participation of mostly urban volunteers and volunteers from the village community. The participation has proven successful, given the successful recruitment of an increasing number of volunteers compared to the first year.

3) Events and activities with the involvement of the village community

The festival also features a wide range of activities and programs on the islands during the festival period. While a portion of those activities are hosted with respective program partners that specialize in those activities, a portion of programs and informal activities involve the village community in highly varied ways. The curators also encourage the village community to ideate or host activities.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the adoption of the festival model for rural revitalization in Hong Kong was initially utilized and popularized by other grassroots initiatives, while in this case, the festival is clearly initiated by the government and state-sponsored. The combination of a conventional ‘top-down’ implementation to revitalization with ‘bottom-up’ local and non-local participation will be considered a neo-endogenous model within this article. The approach is evident in its co-existence of ‘hard’ aspects of planned implementation alongside ‘soft’ initiatives aiming to promote local community exchange and instill a sense of identity.

History and Timeline of the Art Festival

Since 2019, the Tourism Commission initiated a three-year pilot project, the Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival. The three-year Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival was curated by Hulu Culture, a non-profit organization in Hong Kong that endeavors to protect traditional culture and heritage. This festival involved collaborations with local and non-local artists, youths, and villagers, transforming the island into an “open museum” that integrates art, religion, culture, heritage, and environmental elements (*About the Festival*, n.d.).

After the Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival concluded in 2021, several artworks remained on the island as exhibits. Based on the success of this project, the government initiated another three-year arts festival, the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival, to continue highlighting the cultural and ecological attributes of the Sai Kung District. The curators were One Bite Design Studio. Launched in 2022, this festival started with Yim Tin Tsai and Sharp Island in 2022 and expanded in 2023 to include four islands, adding Kau Sai Chau to the list.

Eight artworks on Yim Tin Tsai and Sharp Island are retained from the first event, some with evolved presentations. Ten of the new artwork pieces are new installations inspired by stories and conversations on the Sai Kung islands, showing the hidden narratives of the community. The festival offers over 400 free guided tours on various themes, available every day except Mondays, reserved for individual exploration. Additional public programs, including workshops, performances, and talks, are available on Fridays, weekends, and public holidays.

Geographic Setting

The SKHAF is held in areas of the Sai Kung Peninsula, which is in the easternmost part of the New Territories in Hong Kong. The vast land and sea area of the peninsula remains untouched by urbanization as it is mostly covered by country parks. The artworks are distributed in Sai Kung Town Centre, Yim Tin Tsai, Sharp Island, Kau Sai Chau and High Island (Map below).

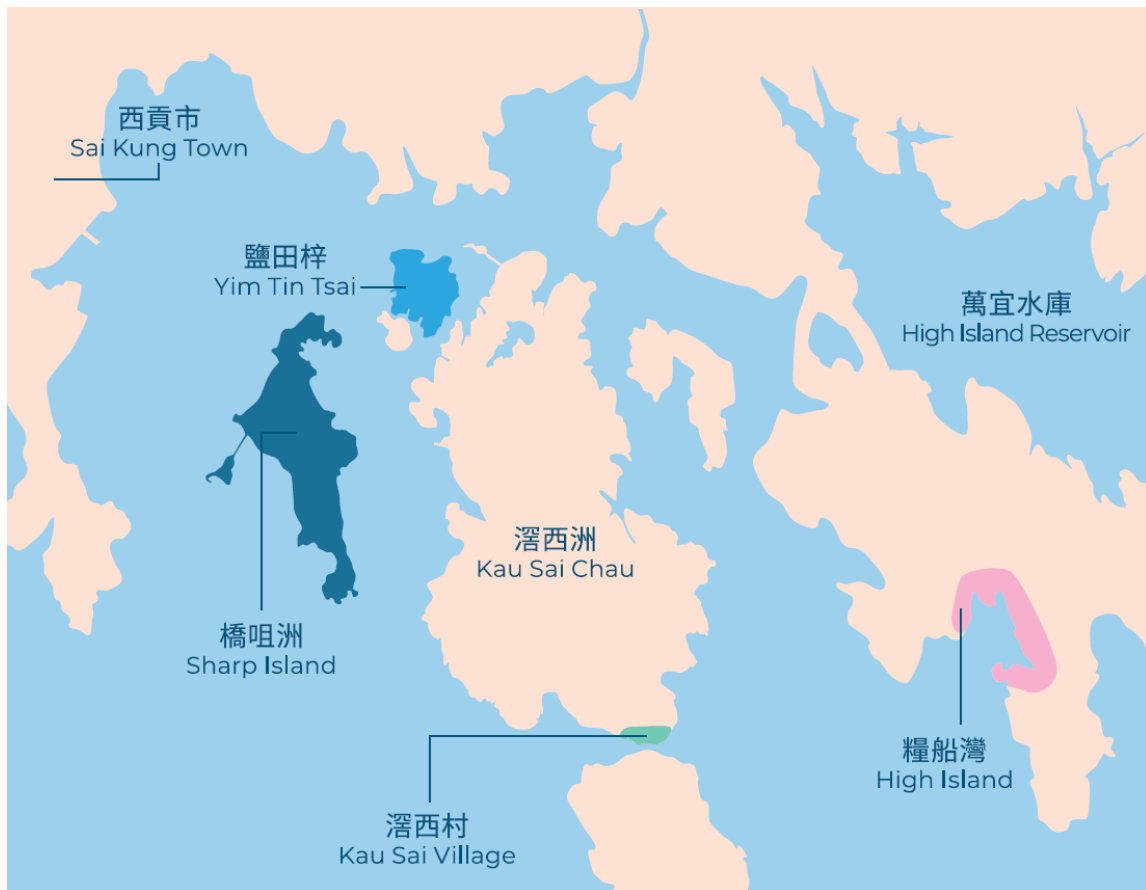


Figure 4-01 Areas of Sai Kung Hoi Art Festival (Map source: SKHAF official website)

High Island and Sharp Island belong within the boundaries of the Sai Kung East Country Park and Sharp Island Country Park (Map below), which are legally designated for the purposes of nature conservation, countryside recreation, and outdoor education.

All the festival area also lies within the Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark area (Map 3), which was designated for landscapes of international significance and is managed under the holistic concept of protection, education, and sustainable development, with the support of local communities and other stakeholders.

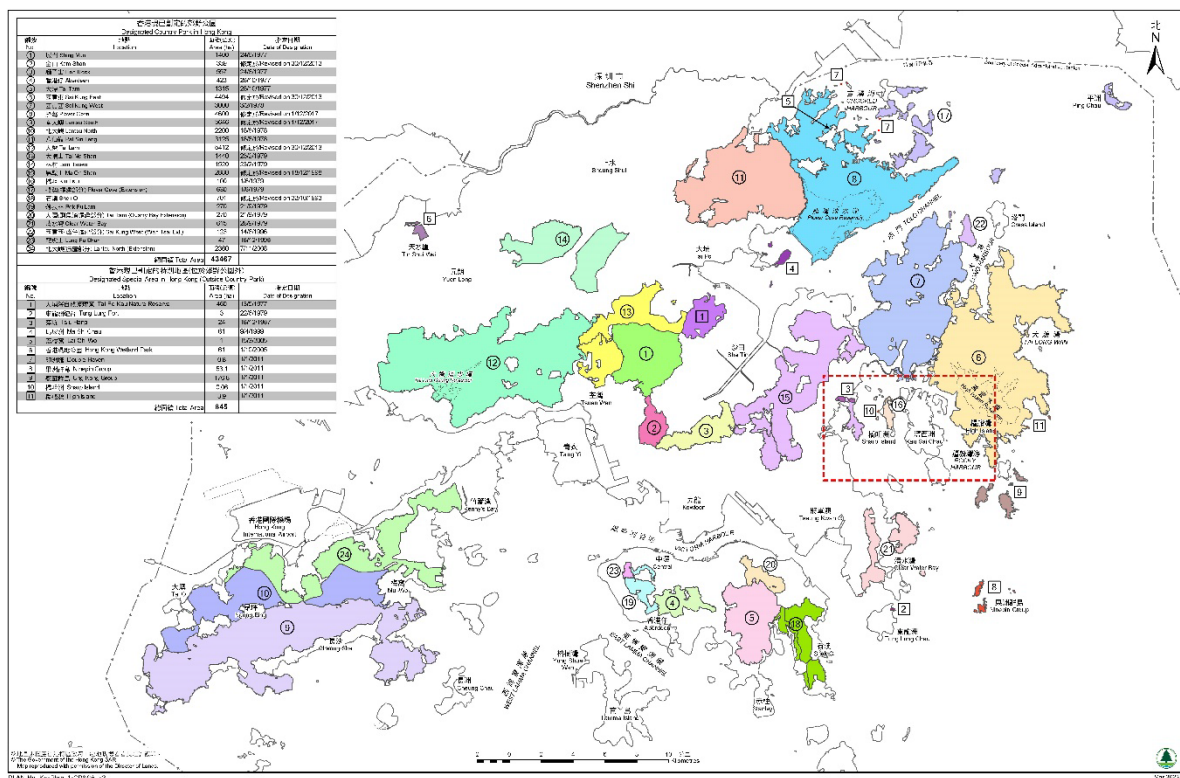


Figure 4-02 Hong Kong Country Park Map with area of SKHAF marked (map source: AFCD)

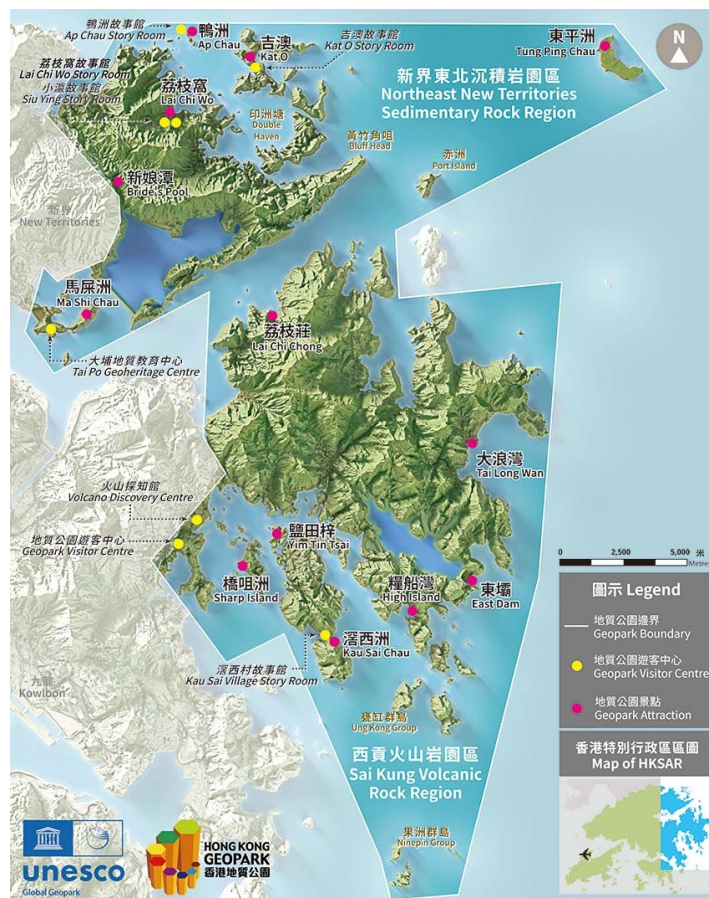


Figure 4-03 Hong Kong Geopark Map (map source: Hong Kong Geopark website)

Communities and heritage within the area

Except for Sharp Island, which is uninhabited, the other three islands all have a history of communities or villages established on the island. While histories and conditions vary on each of the islands, populations generally peaked in the villages on the island around the mid-20th century with a few hundred people. Due to a lack of economic opportunities, many of the villagers moved to the city or immigrated to European countries leading up to the 21st Century. Currently, a few dozen villagers continue to inhabit Kau Sai Village and villages on High Island. The following briefly describes the history, heritage, and current condition of each of the islands.

Yim Tin Tsai:

The villagers of Yim Tin Tsai are descendants of the Chan family, Hakkas, who migrated from Shenzhen around 300 years ago to establish a settlement. At its peak, the village had over 200 residents. In 1864, Catholic missionaries Father S. Volonteri and Father G. Origo arrived to spread Christianity. By ten years later, all residents had been baptized. The community donated land for the construction of a church and a school, dedicating the area to St. Joseph, who became the patron saint of the village. St. Joseph's Chapel was built and consecrated in 1890, marking a significant moment as Yim Tin Tsai is one of the few Hakka villages in Hong Kong with a Catholic heritage.

Following urbanization trends, most villagers relocated to urban areas or overseas, leading to the island's official status as uninhabited by 1998. Despite this, former residents return annually for the Feast Day on the first Sunday in May. There were significant efforts by former residents and community members to restore the island's heritage. Conservation efforts for St. Joseph's Chapel began in 2004, led by villagers and supported by the church, contributing to the development of cultural and eco-tourism. In 2005, the chapel received an Award of Merit from the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation and was declared a Grade 2 Heritage Building in 2011.

Professor Cheung, who is an anthropologist and professor at the University of Science and Technology, was involved in the heritage conservation efforts in Yim Tin Tsai very early on.

Professor Cheung observes that, in the past, the identity of some Yim Tin Tsai villagers was quite limited, especially before the 1997 handover. During that period, people were primarily focused on identifying their relatives and the land they owned, emphasizing their role as villagers and members of their family lineage. However, after the handover, they began to rethink the concept of collective identity and foster a sense of shared belonging. Professor Cheung pointed out that the villagers started to shift their views on heritage conservation, reaching a consensus that “Yim Tin Tsai does not only belong to its residents but also the people of Hong Kong, it is important to open up itself so that the public can understand and learn more about Yim Tin Tsai.”(*YIM TIN TSAI ARTS FESTIVAL*, n.d.).

Currently, the island is uninhabited because there are no liveable properties on it. However, there are villagers who operate stores and the conservation center on the island and come to the island daily or regularly.

Kau Sai Chau:

Kau Sai Village, at the south end of the island, was once a Hakka settlement. Fishermen operating in waters around Kau Sai Chau lived on boats, and the Kau Sai Chau anchorage was their base. They berthed their vessels there to take a break or maintain their fishing boats and equipment. With the help of a British anthropologist, Barbara Ward, who conducted research on the lifestyle and culture of fishermen in Hong Kong, the fishermen applied for a government land license to set up homes in the Kau Sai Village land lot. The hamlet was renamed Kau Sai Fishermen’s Village, and 300 to 400 fishermen settled there in the 1950s. (*About the Festival*, n.d.) The Hung Shing Temple, located on the island, is a declared monument.

Because of economic transformation and a lack of opportunities on the islands over the decades, most of the villagers moved to the city; only about a dozen elderly residents continue to live in Kau Sai Village today. The villagers return to the village to celebrate the Hung Shing festival every year.

High Island:

There are four villages in Leung Shuen Wan: the Hakka villages Tung A, Pak A, and Pak Lap, and the fishing village Sha Kiu. In the past, fishermen anchored their boats in the bay in front of the Tin Hau temple. At the time of the 1911 census, the population of Pak A was 164. Throughout the 1900s, various villagers immigrated to the UK and other European Countries. Currently, several dozen villagers continue to inhabit on the island.

The villagers of High Island worship the sea goddess, Tin Hau, leading to the establishment of the Tin Hau Temple. They celebrate the Tin Hau Festival annually on the 23rd day of the third lunar month, marked by a Cantonese opera and a sea parade in even-numbered years. During the parade, boats clear a path and escort the divine boat in a show of respect. High Island's Tin Hau Water Parade is unique along the Guangdong coast. This festival is also recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hong Kong. (Chan, 2022)

In recent survey research of the history, development, and present-day High Island, Chan (2022) summarized several problems High Island residents are facing in terms of succession of the festivals and cultural heritage. Those issues include insufficient funding, a lack of successors, difficulties in disseminating information, and transportation challenges. Funding problems stem from the high costs associated with organizing the Tin Hau Festival, including hiring Taoist priests, preparing traditional dishes, and renting boats for religious performances and parades. The younger generation, often living and working in urban areas or abroad, shows little interest in taking over the festival responsibilities, which threatens the continuity of this cultural tradition. Additionally, the festival's management committee lacks an official webpage and social media presence, making it difficult to promote the festival and attract visitors and supporters. Transportation also poses a significant problem, as there are no regular ferry services to Grain Boat Bay, deterring potential attendees. However, the dilemma remains between accepting government funding, which could alter the traditional nature of the festival, and the potential ecological and cultural impact of increased tourism(Chan, 2022).

Actors and relationships

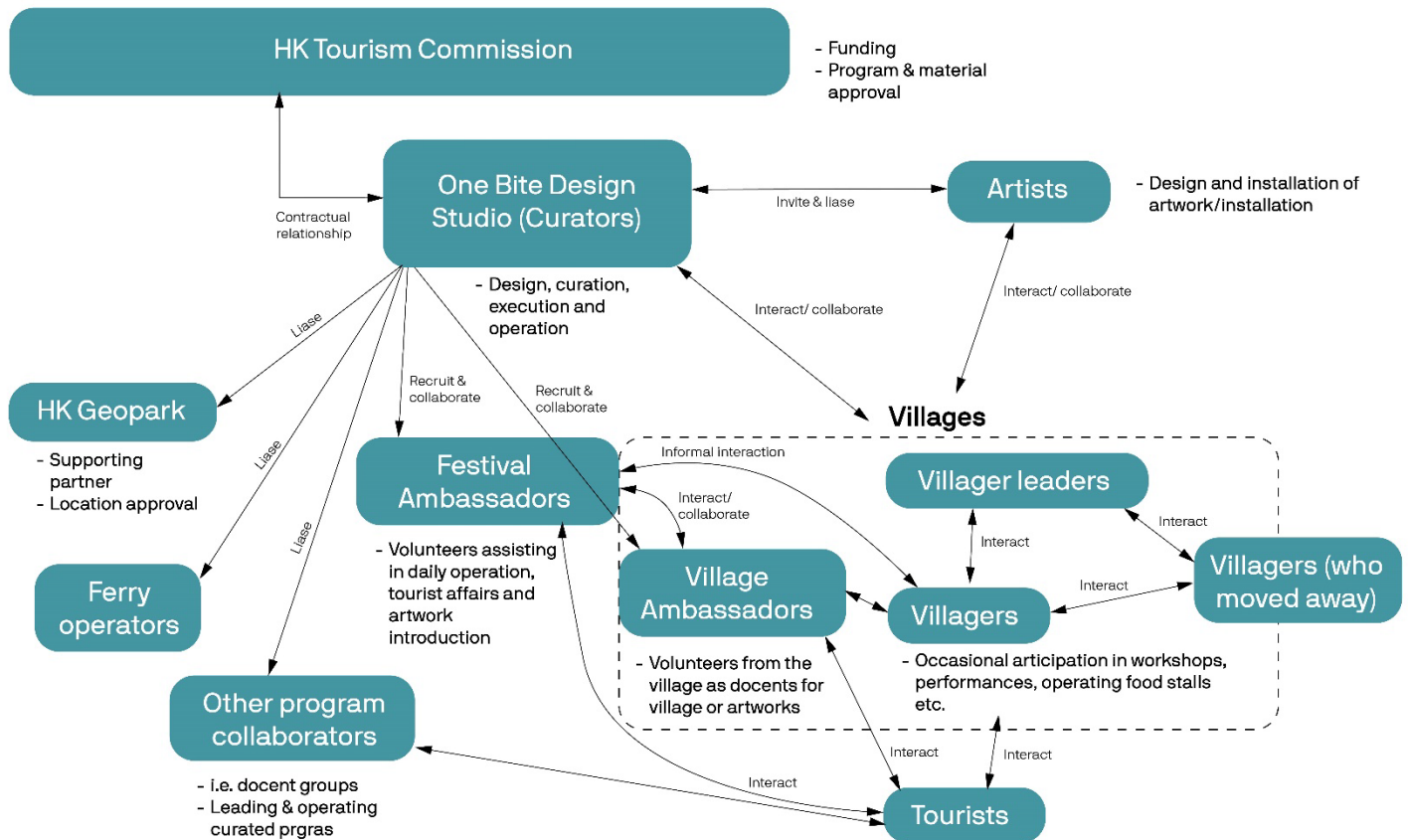


Figure 4-04 Diagram of actors and relationships in SKHAF

The above diagram summarizes the actors and their roles in the festival.

The role of curators as mediators

SKHAF directly creates a relationship between the local village community and art by rooting the artwork in local cultural, historical, and natural resources, such as artworks embedded in the village school or village council building. A collaborative relationship between artists and the local village community is indispensable for the artwork. Such a model inherently places the curators in a role where they must facilitate and navigate relationships between various stakeholders to ensure the festival's success. Research on community-focused public art interventions has shown that these initiatives prompt artistic engagement that moves beyond the traditional art as an object for aesthetic appreciation, integrating deeply into the social context and location through interactions among artists, the audience, and the local community (Qu, 2020).

In addition to the artwork, the art festival's planning that integrates a traditional 'top-down' implementation for festival tourism combined with 'bottom-up' involvement from both local and non-local participants through 'soft' initiatives designed to foster community exchanges and reinforces a sense of identity, also inadvertently positions the curators as negotiators and mediators between local residents, artists, and other collaborators. The balancing of interests between different parties is key to influencing attitudes and engagement.

The curators' efforts in establishing rapport and building relationships with different parties, especially the village communities, were highlighted by various participants when discussing the social interactions the festival facilitated.

As identified from interviews with the curators, the Tourism Commission's primary goal is to boost tourism through the art festival. Their key performance indicators focus on visitor numbers. The basics of the art festival—such as the number of site-specific artworks, guided tours, and programs—were established before the curators were onboarded. While attracting tourists is a basic requirement for the curatorial team, they expressed concerns about the sustainability of a purely tourist-focused strategy. As a placemaking and community-building agency, they envision the festival as an experiential ground where resources can be aligned to meet local aspirations. Through long-term relationship building, they aim to uncover and address local needs.

The curators are acutely aware that the festival is an imposed idea on the local community and that they are 'outsiders' in the village communities whose culture they are trying to showcase. Therefore, they must partner with the villagers and the larger community to facilitate artworks and programs that authentically reflect local culture while attracting visitors. As reflected by an interviewee who was part of the village community, there were concerns from the village community regarding the introduction of artworks before the festival, which they feared might be 'out of place' and irrelevant to their cultural heritage. However, later dialogues between artists and villagers during the art-making process ensured that it was reflective of the community's identity. The interviewees said they liked the artwork and were satisfied with the outcome of the artwork. Volunteers noted that the

existing relationships between the curators and the village community were crucial in fostering a welcoming environment, which was important for building linkages between the local community and visitors.

Physical and logistical arrangements of the festival

The festival is non-gated and non-ticketed. However, to reach the artworks scattered on the islands, visitors must purchase tickets for *kaito* ferries either through the festival organizers or private ferry operators in Sai Kung. The official ticket from the festival comes in a packaged ticket of two routes, where visitors can hop on the island to visit attractions and artworks on each island. The ferry schedule renders it only possible to visit one route a day, and it would most likely take at least two days to visit all the islands. Visitors can sign up for guided tours and activities online.

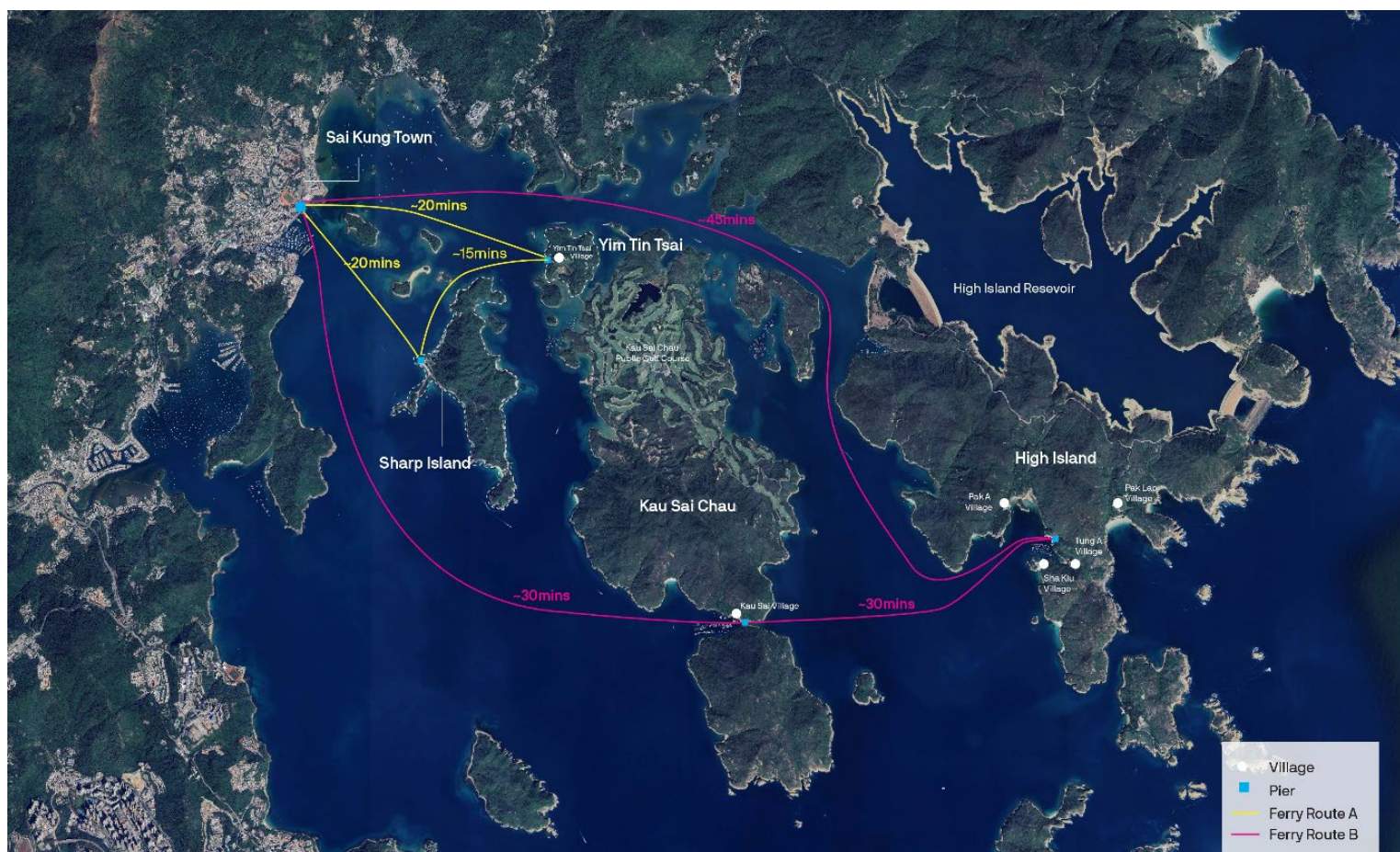


Figure 4-05 Map of ferry Routes for the festival

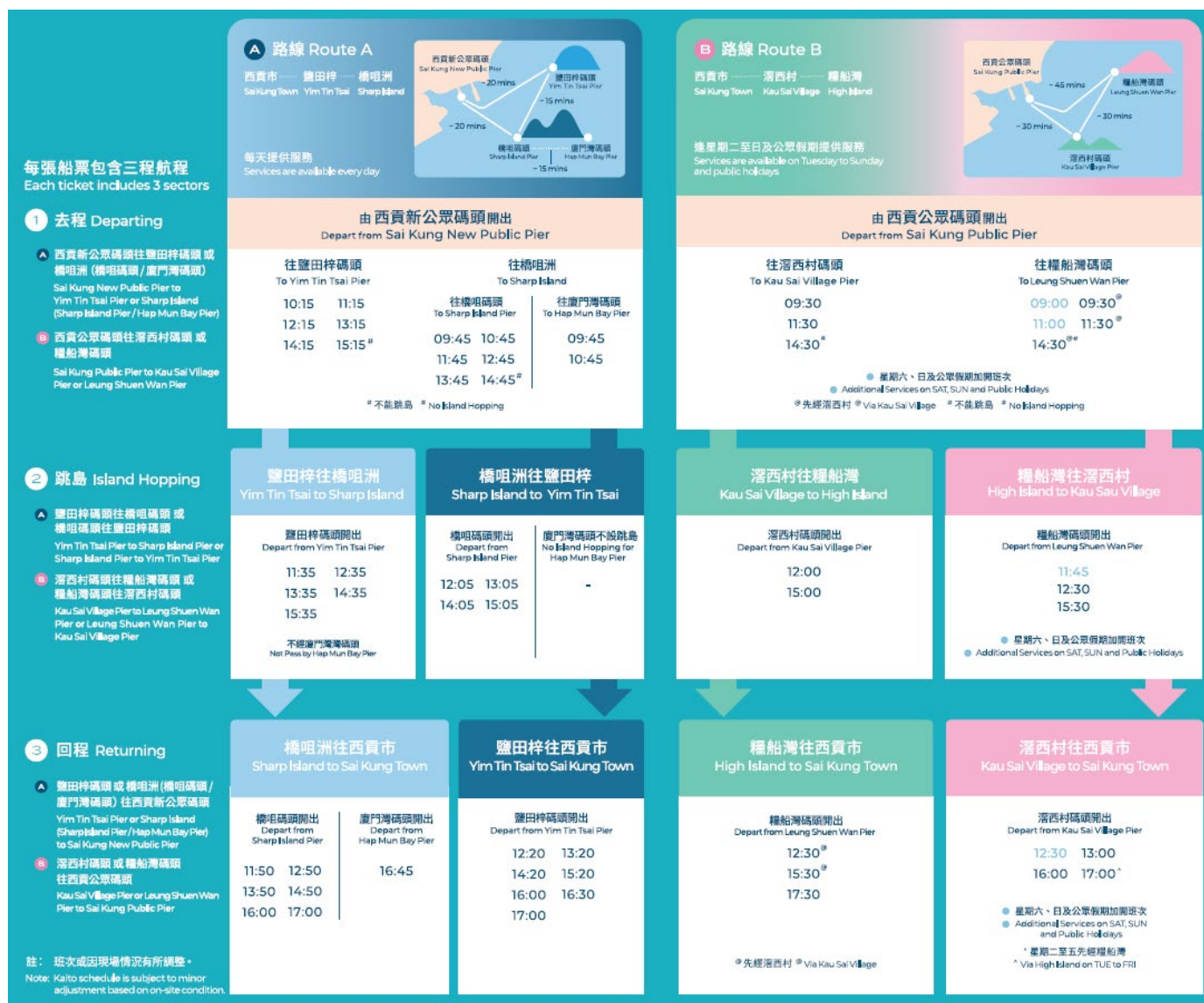


Figure 4-06 Kaito Ferry schedule during the festival (Source: SKHAF pamphlet)

The physical arrangements, complex relationships, and setting of the festival inform some of the findings discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion

The following chapter delves into the findings and discussions derived from the qualitative interviews conducted. The chapter is structured around the main themes that emerged in the three categories of questions. The first set of questions addresses the festival's impact on the interviewee's social interactions and ability to form new relationships. The second set focuses on the impact of the festival on the relationship between the interviewee and the place and discusses the interviewees' connection to the place. The final set explores the interviewee's thoughts and engagement with social or community issues on the islands, in which the theme of tourism as a double-edged sword emerged. Other findings in the interviews that present issues or potential conflicts are further discussed under issues and limitations.

Forging of connections through tangible changes initiated by the art festival

When asked about social interactions and relationships the festival has brought about to the interviewees, interviewees were able to recount how connections were forged through several tangible changes initiated by the art festival. A point to note in the context of the Sai Kung is the fact that only a small handful of the villagers continue to reside on the islands. Many villagers who grew up in the villages on the islands either moved overseas to Sai Kung or other urban parts of Hong Kong. Most of the interviewees who were part of the village community lived in Sai Kung. While they retained various ties with the villages, going back to the villages in the islands was not a regular affair unless there was a special occasion or celebration. A significant change the festival has been able to bring about was the provision of regular public ferry service to High Island and Kau Sai Chau, which did not exist before the 2023 art festival. Ferry operators were simply not inclined to operate the ferry route without a certain passenger volume to sustain their operations. The festival curators were able to negotiate a public ferry operation between Sai Kung town, Kau Sai Chau, and High Island with the anticipated demand from festival tourists. Interviewees from Kau Sai Chau and High Island reflected on how the improvement in access was very welcomed. A lot of villagers who moved out of the islands to live in Sai Kung or other urban areas felt like they were able to reconnect and meet with many other villagers because of the renewed

access to the Island. By removing the inconvenience of access to the islands, visits to the islands were no longer considered limited to special occasions or specific events. This logistical improvement not only allowed these mostly retired individuals to visit more frequently but also facilitated their reintegration into the island community, fostering a sense of reunion.

The strengthening of connections between villagers also came from the opportunity to participate in volunteer networks through the festival, namely as the village ambassadors, festival ambassadors, and other program partners. This was reflected by both the curators and villagers, who highlighted the limited participation in village affairs for villagers who were not in village leadership roles. The festival volunteer role opened doors for villagers who were previously less involved in community affairs, including some members of the younger generation who did not grow up on the islands. By stepping into these roles, they gained opportunities to actively take part in shaping the happenings on the islands during the festival period. While the responsibilities of becoming a village ambassador within the festival do not entail active community organizing and leadership itself and have limited responsibilities that are mostly related to being a docent for the place and artworks, the opportunity simply acts as a vehicle for an increased level of involvement with the village for the individual. This involvement was further enriched as some villager ambassadors contributed personal materials and stories to the festival docent materials, which strengthened communal bonds.

Two respondents from the village community also had the opportunity to host certain related activities that were prompted by the curators, such as opening a traditional food stall during weekends and performing the traditional Hakka Unicorn dance. While the initial idea was prompted by the curators, its value as an opportunity to reunite with other members of the village community was clear to the respondent:

Yes, they [the curatorial team] told me to do it. But I am so happy to have the chance to call all my sisters (referring to other members of the village community who she grew up with) and cook something. I asked my mother about all the traditional recipes, and we all learned it again, they were probably lost if not.

With the experience of the first year of the festival, various respondents who were part of the village community shared ideas of what they might want to hold as activities or workshops in the second year of the festival. After doing a performance of the traditional Unicorn dancing in the village, one respondent wanted to host unicorn dancing classes to teach other people the traditional dance form, which he noted would not be possible without some form of support in venue and organizing.

Those who are involved with the production of artwork also find the interaction with the artist meaningful. One interviewee was involved in many meetings with artists to give input in hopes that the artworks reflected a connection to the village and the culture:

We did give a lot of suggestions and opinions to the artists so that through their artwork creation, they can make an actual connection to the village and culture. This is very meaningful, more than the artwork itself. We gave them suggestions, and they were receptive to that.

The setup of the festival also created relationships between the volunteers in the role of Festival ambassadors and the villagers living on the islands. By spending extensive periods of time on the islands during the festival, their immersion in daily activities and participation in informal gatherings alongside villagers not only allowed them to experience village life but also helped forge personal connections. Most of the interactions they mentioned exceeded their formal roles as festival ambassadors but were snippets related to spending time on the islands. These interactions were recounted by several festival ambassadors.

Kau Sai Villager is full of warmth. They would always ask us if we had enough food. When they were preparing their own meals every day, they would always share some with us. There was also one time when they caught some fresh cuttlefish, and everyone shared that together.

Urbanites, indigenous villages, and clan social networks are not usually very accessible to 'outsiders.' Festival ambassador interviewees noted continued relationships with villagers and revisiting the islands for traditional festival celebrations. Klien's(2010) research highlights how relationships between urban volunteers and locals are constantly juxtaposed with the top-down hierarchical relations often present in encounters between villagers and festival organizers or world-famous artists. Klien observes, "Formal hierarchical

relations in the conventional 'top-down' manner, often emerging in encounters between world-famous artists and villagers, or worse, insufficient exchange and explanation provided by the gallery towards residents, have been juxtaposed with egalitarian and mutually inspiring relations between senior villagers and young urbanites volunteering as kohebitai."(Klien, 2010)

Furthermore, the set-up of a slower travel pace inadvertently facilitated spontaneous interactions among tourists and other attendees. The extended waiting times for ferries to the more remote islands, often up to three hours, created windows for casual exchanges and interactions. While I was not able to speak directly with any villagers who participated in the role of the village ambassador, the curators, and other volunteer respondents mentioned that many of them showed that they really enjoyed interacting with visitors.

Connection to place

When asked whether the festival has increased their sense of belonging or changed the way they viewed the islands or villages, a common theme among villager respondents is that tourism and the process of artworks have allowed them to contemplate the appeal of their own villages. This is also reiterated by the feedback the festival curators have received, especially in the two islands that were new additions, where some villagers described newfound pride for their village and culture. One of the village community respondents said:

When I was a kid, I used to think this place was heaven. Of course, other people may not have seen it that way, we were very poor. I'm glad that some people can come and see it in another light.

Another respondent mentioned,

At least other people know our village exists now. Otherwise, a lot of people don't even know about our village.

Klien makes the same point that festival tourism has had the effect of "consolidating local identity because local residents are given the opportunity to reflect on the attractiveness of their region"(Klien, 2010). She further suggests that as the festival plays its role as a medium to provide new interactions, it effectively reduces feelings of desolation

due to depopulation or decline. Respondents who were part of the village community mentioned that their sense of belonging to the island and villages has always been strong. It has not necessarily been changed due to the festival, but they can see how the marketing and rebranding can help a younger generation gain new interest in their place.

The responses from volunteers and tourists were mixed and largely varied depending on their experiences and previous engagement with Sai Kung. Most respondents expressed that they were able to learn an additional dimension of the islands of Sai Kung other than that they were just natural areas. For tourists, that mostly came from the understanding and interaction with artworks or guided explanations. They think the artwork's connection to the local context was helpful in raising their awareness of local culture and history.

The volunteers had much more chances to interact with members of the village community and experience aspects of village life. One respondent described a sense of belonging stemming from being more invested and engaged with the place:

I would say I have a stronger sense of belonging now after being an ambassador for two years. (During the art festival) I introduced the artworks, the place, and the culture of the area. Afterward, I find myself taking the initiative to find different materials and learn more about the place through various methods. So, I feel like I'm not just a 'tourist' anymore. ... I keep studying more, wanting to know more about the community, know more about what's happening, what's going on, and what impacts the community. I find myself very invested.

Awareness that tourism is a double-edged sword

The theme of tourism as a double-edged sword emerged in the responses from villagers, tourists, and volunteers. All interviewees expressed a desire for the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival to continue, recognizing its role in bringing attention and tourism to the area, which they deemed, in some ways, to support the future of the area. However, they also voiced concerns about the risks of over-tourism.

Two respondents from the village community said they were worried that the art festival would bring about large-scale developments or attract commercial developers to the

area, which they were relieved has not happened yet. Another respondent from the village community who operated a store on one of the islands reflected that too many tourists overwhelmed him. He normally enjoys chatting with customers, but one year, when the COVID restrictions lifted, there was a boom in tourism that led to an influx of visitors. This situation was described as a bit 'annoying' to him because the overwhelming number of tourists hindered his usual interactions and was simply overwhelming.

Respondents who were volunteers during the festival also mentioned some poor behaviors from tourists that negatively affected the local community, such as disrespecting private spaces and littering. They felt these were inevitable outcomes of tourism, and they could only try their best to educate tourists in their roles. One volunteer mentioned that he believes the curators are trying to be proactive on this issue by organizing volunteer beach cleanups and rubbish collection activities as part of the festival "experiences" or activities that people can sign up for. The initiative aims to mitigate some of the negative impacts of tourism by involving visitors in the maintenance and care of the area.

Issues and limitations

Artworks as a new cultural asset

The introduction of new cultural assets, such as artworks, through the festival presents a complex issue. The issue of whether artists can create artwork that embodies a deep understanding of the place and local culture is more nuanced. Volunteers and tourist interviewees had opinions about some artwork that they found were 'gimmicky' and targeted people who wanted to 'take an Instagrammable picture' instead of being functional or deeply meaningful to any party. The intention of the curators and artists to include the local village community in the art-making process and to respect their concerns is clear, but there are varying degrees of engagement, and in the end, only a selected number of people are involved. Interview findings also suggest that locals find that they only resonated with some artworks more than others, especially if they were not involved in the making of the artwork. More often, they dismissed if their opinion about the artwork mattered.

When asked about the artwork on the islands, many members of the village community's immediate reaction is that they don't understand art or they do not know

about art. Despite initial responses about not understanding the art, respondents had mixed opinions about the artwork. Some mentioned not knowing how to value it, as reflected in the following statement:

I resonate with some of them. Some others are a bit abstract... I'm not an artist, so I don't know how to appreciate or evaluate them.

Others clearly saw its value as an attraction for visitors and a way to spark creativity in the local landscape:

Well, I think the main thing is that the artwork attracts visitors, and young people can use some creativity to create new solutions here.

The art festival is marketed not only as an art event but also as a cultural heritage tourism event. While there has not been cultural conflict between the community's traditional culture and the festival's re-articulation of that culture, the quality and cultural sustainability of the new cultural assets introduced by the festival should be considered. In his research about the cultural sustainability of the bun festival in Hong Kong, Chew(2009) argued that while contemporary elements can be fun or meaningful, they often lack the sense of exoticism, local cultural immersion, and intellectual depth that appeal to cultural tourists (Chew, 2009). It can be unsustainable when contemporary elements displace historic elements of the island's culture. While this has not been the case observed in SKHAF, the concern extends beyond the quality of the art as a cultural asset to include whether it is reflective and respectful of the community and whether its aesthetic value is recognizable to a layperson. Two interviewees from the village community also expressed aspiration for more depth in the festival:

Next year, this island's art festival will be in its third year. I think there should be something deeper, a more in-depth art festival. A lot of things should be more developed and mature now after two years of the art festival. I will leave it to them (referring to the curatorial team), younger people, to think about what that is.

While art can add value to the community and increase local attractiveness, as some research viewpoints suggest, when the increased attractiveness is primarily for the sake of

visitors rather than locals, it can lead to the perception of the festival as a fad aimed at drawing consumers(Qu, 2019) rather than fostering genuine community engagement.

Aspirations for direct and structural improvements

When members of the village communities were asked what areas they thought the art festival could do better or improve on, interviewees' answers included various direct and structural improvements to their villages and islands. These include the development of public amenities, such as pavilions and better public infrastructures. One interviewee mentioned their aspiration for the village to ultimately be revitalized to a state where villagers could return to live on the islands, addressing the current lack of hospitable housing. While this was not directly discussed, it was alluded to that the villagers' aspirations for revitalization encompass improved living conditions on the island. They hope that the festival will contribute to achieving this goal.

However, the festival, still in the second year of its operation, currently offers little in the way of direct and structural improvements. It is also unclear whether the festival's goals for 'revitalization' align with the village community's vision. This misalignment raises concerns about the long-term impact of the festival on the local community. The villagers may hold an unrealistic expectation that the art festival will ultimately "help" the place improve according to their specific desires.

Tagore's(2024) research mentions that investing in art festivals has become a cost-efficient way for government agencies to support community-building measures in many of Japan's most vulnerable areas. This investment often allows the government to absolve itself of addressing the complex sociopolitical issues contributing to rural and post-disaster disparities. Similarly, the nature of state sponsorship, as well as its community-building capacities in the Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival, may make it unclear to the local community what the ultimate aim of the festival truly is.

In her research on art festivals aimed at revitalization in Japan, Tagore(2024) argues that requiring participating artists to show measurable community development outcomes in their works can quickly lead to exploitative relationships for both artists and residents. This points to a key limitation of the festival model: while it encourages socially engaged art,

it cannot hold the artists responsible for measurable community development outcomes. Consequently, there are disparities between the reality and the intentions of contemporary art festivals, which can cause disappointment or confusion among residents if they have unrealistic expectations.

Novelty and continued engagement for tourists

While all the interviewees from the village community and volunteers expressed a desire for the festival to continue and for their continued involvement, the tourists painted a different picture. All but one tourist interviewee said they would be interested in revisiting the festival. One interviewee expressed that she would be interested in being further involved as a festival ambassador the following year, which shows promise for people inspired to engage more deeply. Those not interested in coming back did not feel that there would be anything strikingly new they would want to re-experience. Despite gaining a deeper sense of place and a positive experience in the interactions gained from their visit, they do not feel drawn to participate in any further activity. This raises questions about the sustainability of the festival, which heavily relies on the influx of tourists.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Through the social relationships and the stronger connection to the place that the festival was able to create, the festival has been a vehicle to break through barriers, create alternative social relations, and create a larger civic network for those involved. The results showed positive signs where the local community and stakeholders were able to share interests and concerns and act and influence their place. Expanding the island's civic network helps to add to its innovation capital and forms the basis for civic space. The art festival does have the power to encourage community revitalization and to bring community development to some extent. From this point of view, artistic interventions do play a key role in sparking creativity and social innovation that further benefits other creative activities and future policy goals for regional development(Qu, 2019). The festival has allowed the islands to act as a realm of civic space and encouraged deeper interaction and engagement for the village community and volunteers beyond tourism.

The findings of this research underscore the relational nature of civic space, emphasizing that the 'civic' aspect is far more significant than the physical space itself. People's social interactions and emotional connections to places stemming from those relationships extend what is conventionally defined and understood about space, typically seen as containers or geometric forms. This relational perspective expands the conventional definition of space from merely a physical entity to one that includes relational dynamics. Social practices alter spaces by altering people's experiences and relation to the space. This relational thinking of space also suggests that civic spaces are continuously redefined by the communities that inhabit and engage with them. By understanding civic space as a relational public space, built environment practitioners can imbue people-centered approaches in their designs, ensuring that spaces are not only physically relevant but also socially and emotionally resonant for the communities they serve.

While the study found that the SKHAF had positive outcomes by creating relational civic space and positive social interactions between different actors through the art festival model, the findings suggest that more is needed beyond the current festival to sustain social engagement and to extend civic space beyond the festival. The notion of civic space can

extend beyond the festival in the sense that the successful formation of a strong civic space shall allow its social engagement to continue and sustain community action even without the presence of the festival. Findings relating to people's mixed reaction to the connection to place, desire for more depth in the festival, and the community's limited agency suggest the need for more capacity-building, community-building, and organization. Questions about how social engagement and community action could be sustained beyond the festival and what would happen to the community should the festival be discontinued are questions that need to be reflected on. The organizers and curators should reconsider the balance between prioritizing tourist initiatives and community capacity-building initiatives. Emphasizing the latter approach may enable locals to move from being mere participants with limited agency to becoming active partners in the production of community action. This further highlights the role of the curators as an intermediary that bridges the organizers (Tourism Commission), who are strongly focused on tourism goals and the wider local community. Navigating competing agendas is a challenge faced by other art festivals as reflected in the literature review section, and ways must be found to encourage deeper participation.

Regarding revitalization, owing to the fact that these islands have already faced significant decline and with few or non-inhabitants remaining on them, the festival may present a valuable short-term model for sparking creativity and building a civic network, especially among the larger village community and those appreciative of the place. However, if this is to be a longer-term revitalization plan beyond its three years as a tourism initiative, it needs to be carefully thought out to address deeper issues related to the area's cultural inheritance, revitalization, and community capacity-building.

It is also worth noting that there is a discrepancy between the attitudes of communities from islands (Yim Tin Tsai) that have experienced the prior pilot program and the islands that have newly joined since 2023 that the research has been unable to cover and compare fully. Yim Tin Tsai has had its own conservation efforts since 2005 and continues to have its own operating conservation centers separate from the art festival. The village community there has experienced the festival, starting from the pilot scheme under a different curator for five years. The village community is seen to be much less excited and eager about the festival, which leads us to foresee the longer-term results for the other islands as well.

To ensure a revitalization process that incorporates both the growth of SKHAF and the sustainable development of the islands and their communities in the longer term, the organizers and curators should also consider fostering opportunities for locals to develop bottom-up initiatives. Echoing the above discussion about community capacity building, it is important that the local community, not just the village community, becomes active partners in the production of cultural change as well. As illustrated in other research, revitalization is only sustainable if incentives are created for residents to establish local autonomy (Klien, 2010), instead of mere romanticization of the countryside. The boost in recognition of a once disconnected and unknown region can offer chances for positive local-visitor interactions, but more is needed for it to be sustained upon initial attraction.

The findings presented here focus on the relationship between civic space and alternative social relations fostered and affected by ongoing art festival development. The focus may limit their application to the widely discussed issues in art tourism, revitalization, and heritage preservation cases. Additionally, this research presents significant limitations on data collection during fieldwork, including the limited timeframe for data collection, the unavailability of various key actors such as festival ambassadors and artists, and bias in the purposive selection of interviewees. The sample size of interviewees is limited, and quantitative data was not collected for the research to supplement the interpretation of the qualitative data. The interpretation of qualitative data may also be subject to bias. The art festival's influence and impact extend further to many aspects. Further studies should be conducted on related issues such as community placemaking, the relationship between art and community, heritage conservation, and festival management.

Research that delves into the effects and outcomes of this increasingly common approach to regional revitalization will provide decision-makers with a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between art, local populations, tourists, and neighboring communities, ultimately leading to more effective planning.

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