

## “Modernology”, cultural heritage and neighbourhood tourism: The example of Sheung Wan, Hong Kong

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### Introduction

The Japanese humanities discipline of “modernology”, known as *kogengaku*, is somewhat alien to Western academia. It originated in Japan in the 1920s, but to date, little has been recorded about its emergence and development there during the ensuing century. Although not a specialist on the subject, Dr Cheung became acquainted with modernology during his decade of study of ethnology and cultural anthropology in Japan. From that, he believed modernology would provide a suitable way to explore the historical development of local culture in Hong Kong.

Put simply, modernology studies modern society by interpreting the practices of customs from different perspectives, based on collecting and analysing detailed data. Space and time are the indicators for data collection. In other words, modernology focuses on the study of details about built monuments and their social and cultural contexts at a specific historical moment. That might sound similar to the sociology or “phenomenology” of Western academics, but modernology differs by its pinpointing of accurate observations in real settings as well as by its mode of data organization, rather than pursuing and analysing high-level theories. In this it follows Japanese humanities research practice, which values the meticulous collection of data over delving into theory in order to construct yet more theory. As a result, in a setting of urban modernization, modernology is a way for both academics and the general public to understand and reflect on changes in their neighbourhoods.

Konwa Jiro, one important founder of modernology, was a student of Yanagita Kunio, renowned as the “father of Japanese folklore”. Konwa specialized in the study of village homes. The relationship between Konwa and Yanagita broke up in 1927 because Konwa advocated modernology, and his research had thus shifted significantly from villages to the city. From 1927, Konwa was interested in investigating how the 1923 Tokyo earthquake had

changed the living environment in the *shitamachi* (downtown) of Tokyo. His studies became the foundation of modernology.

There are intricate relationships between modernology and archaeology, but also subtle differences, as can be detected from their names. They are alike in that both observe, deduce, hypothesize, or even reconstruct a past living style from scattered and incomplete old bits of evidence. For instance, the study of “street observation”, derived later, attracted many architectural historians. However, the two fields are different because archaeology is the study of the past, whereas modernology focuses on modern urban development, including the changing lives of ordinary citizens and the rise and fall of recent customs.

In this article, we borrow the ideas of modernology with its strength based on the comprehensive and detailed use of various sources, including observation, oral history, historical archives, local records, and comparative analysis to understand a complex urban history in a fast changing region in Hong Kong. We focus this “modernological eye” to understand Sheung Wan, a local Chinese business neighbourhood. This is done for two reasons. The first is to rediscover the local Hong Kong culture that depends intimately on knowledge of a wide range of imported commodities as well as the dried marine products created in this trading hub. The second is to propose a methodological approach that would enable tourists or other visitors on their own to discover and experience some local tastes and flavours.

### Background to the project

To better understand the history and trade system of Sheung Wan as a coastal hub, we conducted interviews with traders (importers, wholesalers and retailers) as well as shoppers in the local community. We did this to tap into their knowledge and stories about their trades and heritage preservation strategies. Information gathered from these

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interviews, surveys and archival materials forms the basis of an interactive website that contains walking maps and academic articles and books for reference. It enables visitors to explore the history and culture of Nam Pak Hong (a south–north trading company), the Chinese herbal medicine street, and the salted fish alleys in Sheung Wan.

The overall purpose of this project is to assist in the diversification and enhancement of the management of local cultural resources for Hong Kong's in-bound tourists. Most visitors to Hong Kong are encouraged to shop and sample a variety of cuisines in the Central, Tsimshatsui, Causeway Bay, Mongkok districts and elsewhere. In this way they enjoy the unique atmosphere in Hong Kong as an Asian metropolis. However, this dominant image of Hong Kong as a destination based on consumerism fails to give tourists a comprehensive sense of local culture and the associated deeply interesting and rewarding experience of tradition and heritage. Hong Kong is unique, so it does not do it justice if we feature only its business-oriented and materialistic aspects. Thus, we undertook this knowledge transfer project in the Sheung Wan neighbourhood.

The immediate objectives of the project were to:

- 1) examine the roles of a local community such as Sheung Wan in terms of its cultural and heritage aspects, and tap into its collective knowledge;
- 2) ascertain the needs of the tourists regarding cultural tourism; and
- 3) develop a cultural tour prototype of the local community in the Sheung Wan neighbourhood that would systematically feature the culinary heritages of Hong Kong as exemplified by its ethnic and cultural diversity, economic and political interests in food trades, as well as urban development and heritage conservation.

Also, by using an Internet information base, tourists will be able to learn about local and national history, traditional trade relations, impacts of globalization, Chinese culinary culture, local development, and heritage preservation strategies.

This project employs cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and critical approaches to understand the historical background and culinary heritages of Hong Kong society, as a social and cultural basis for the development of sustainable tourism. In the long term, the prototype developed in Sheung Wan can serve as model so that more local neighbourhoods would be included in the overall cultural tourism project. This way, communities' awareness of being promoters for Hong Kong tourism can be enhanced, and both in-bound and domestic tourists can enjoy and benefit from learning — from the perspective of everyday life — how Hong Kong developed into a city renowned

worldwide. Most importantly, the collective knowledge of a community can be preserved and passed on to future generations. A variety of unique areas have a similar potential to be developed for cultural tourism and walking tours. These include the seafood market in Lau Fau Shan, the organic food market in Tai Po, the freshwater fish wholesale market in Yuen Long, the fruit wholesale market in Yaumatei, the garment wholesale market in Shamshuipo, and the migrant neighbourhood in North Point, to name but a few possibilities.

### The Sheung Wan neighbourhood

Many neighbourhoods in Hong Kong are rich in historical and cultural features that are worthwhile for citizens and tourists to explore. Over the last century, the neighbourhood of Sheung Wan has helped make Hong Kong a successful and important trading hub, and traditional trade characteristics remain visible there today.



**Figure 1.** Bonham Strand, a typically crowded business street in Sheung Wan.

Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, through the network of overseas Chinese in Thailand, the Nam Pak Hong was established to facilitate the import of various dried products into Hong Kong, for the purposes of trading with Chinese societies throughout Asia. Dating back to when Hong Kong was just a fishing

village, the geographical location of Sheung Wan made it a very active trading centre, and its traditional business practices have somehow been preserved and remained this way ever since.

Nowadays, Sheung Wan is still seen as the place with clusters of streets full of dried marine products importers, wholesalers, retailers, and modern mini-supermarkets selling dried seafood (Figs. 1 and 2). This creates an exotic and unique image, and leaves a lasting impression for anyone visiting there for the first time. Sheung Wan's traders handle dried food commodities from all over the world, including abalones from Japan, sea cucumbers from Indonesia, salted fish from Bangladesh, herbal medicines from mainland China, paste made from locally harvested and fermented planktonic shrimp, aged tangerine peels, fish maws, ginseng, and birds' nests, among many others. They also bear witness to the evolution of this locality and so have stories to share as part of the oral history of the community.

Because these food items are part of the Chinese culture, we consider this a unique experience for inbound tourists and excursionists looking for the culture and history of Hong Kong. Besides having been a trading hub as well as a commercial centre of Hong Kong for over a century, this kind of Sheung Wan neighbourhood visit contributes to local awareness through the interactions between tourists and local communities.

In 2012, we undertook a knowledge transfer project entitled "Learning from neighbourhood tourism in Sheung Wan, Hong Kong" (Cheung 2012), which prioritised data collection over theoretical analyses. By delving into Nam Pak Hong, we flashed back to the trade-development relationships of dried seafood, traditional Chinese medicines and groceries such as salted fish over the past century. By doing so, we hoped to transform the knowledge gained from our community into a tourism resource, and hence an opportunity for local people and overseas visitors



**Figure 2.** Sheung Wan becomes especially busy around the Lunar or Chinese New Year, with people shopping for celebratory foods.



**Figure 3.** Space is at a premium in Hong Kong, so salted fish are sometimes put in the street for sun drying.

to learn and explore. We believe the curiosity required in street observation in modernology can be a cornerstone that fosters a mutual interaction between communities and tourism.

### **Salted fish — Yuen Shing Hong**

Yuen Shing Hong is one of the largest salted fish distributors in Hong Kong. "Fifty per cent of salted fish in Hong Kong is transacted here," estimated the owner, Mr Wong. An auction is held every few days because the supply is plentiful. Prior to each auction, Mr Wong sends an invitation letter to all retailers. They gather at Yuen Shing Hong on the auction day for fierce



**Figure 4.** Medium size salted croakers packed in plastic bags with their heads wrapped in paper.



**Figure 5.** A salted fish retail shop in Sheung Wan.

bargaining, which lasts one to one-and-a-half hours, depending on the amount of goods. The process is extremely quick and effective. Boxes of salted fish are taken out of the shop just after being dragged out from the back room.

Salted fish, which come in all sizes and species, and are now seen in shops around Hong Kong, are usually packed in plastic bags with their heads wrapped in paper (Figs. 4 and 5).

"How do we pick the right fish? Normally, salted fish are categorized as being either 'firm' or 'tangy', regardless of species. Fermentation makes the difference. When fish are caught in the fair

weather months of autumn and winter, they are put into ice right away to keep them fresh and prevent any fermentation. Then they are buried in salt for two to three days, before drying in the sun. The flesh of these salted fish is 'firm' and has a strong salty flavour," Mr Wong explained.

He also said that "the fish could not be fermented if any part of it touched the ice."

In contrast, "tangy" salted fish is not chilled, but pickled directly by salting so the fish can be fully fermented and is nicely piquant. Some fish may have touched the ice accidentally during catching. If such fish are treated in the "tangy" way, they could have both flavours of salted fish — the iced part being "firm" and the rest being "tangy". A staff member in the salted fish shop pointed at two rows of identical threadfins: "Can you tell which is which?," he asked. I shook my head. "Actually," he continued, "the secret lies in your fingertip. Pinch the fish softly — 'firm' is firm while 'tangy' feels squishy".

Steaming is the best way to perfect the aroma and tenderness of salted fish to its fullest. According to Mr Wong, salted fish and minced pork patty always make the best match — you may steam them together with some shredded ginger and scallion, so that the flavours of salted fish and meat mingle. Done in this way, the patty is sweet but not greasy. The ratio of fat and thin minced pork should be about 1:5, and it is better to hand-chop it to preserve a bit of the meat fibre and a chewy texture. Adding egg white would make the patty even smoother and taste better. "Last but not the least," he added, "don't forget the meaty juice that is left behind after steaming — it is the essence of the dish." Boiling and pan-frying salted fish are also common household cooking methods. Red snapper head is a common ingredient for simmered soup. Pan-fried salted fish gives a pungent aroma. Mr Wong has a tip for pan-frying salted fish: "steam it first, and get rid of the excessive juice so that the fish will be tender and less salty." Pan-fried white

herring is a noble dish in a hotel banquet. The priciest white herrings are sold at USD 220 per kg, while a normal-grade threadfin or croakers cost only USD 25–40. Croakers are good for pan-frying because they have more fat. “Another tip,” Mr Wong continued, “is that minced garlic can bring out its taste better than shredded ginger.”

The two remaining salted fish shops on Des Voeux Road West also sell locally produced shrimp paste, either in jars (Fig. 6) or as solid blocks. Sautéed Chinese broccoli with shrimp paste has a deliciousness that can fill your nostrils. Also, it is a good source of calcium.

In terms of salted fish production, the fishermen’s “unblemished fish” is the most exquisite. An iron hook is inserted into the fish belly, via the gill, to pull out the guts and intestines without cutting open the belly. The belly is then filled with salt, and salt is also spread all over the fish skin. After the fish has been salt-treated for a full day, it is scaled and washed thoroughly, and its head is wrapped in paper before the fish is placed under direct sunlight. Boat people sun-dry their salted fish on the boat to keep flies away as well as to make full use of



**Figure 6.** Locally produced planktonic and fermented shrimp paste.

the more constant temperature on the sea, as well as the sea breeze. Such fish have an amazing “oceanic” flavour and better meat texture. It is a pity that boatmen have opted increasingly for more promising jobs ashore and are leaving the old industry. The sea breeze remains unchanged, but the salty smell of “unblemished fish” has weakened!

Economic changes have altered the entire salted fish industry, especially the source of supply and production, and local production is minimal nowadays. Today, most salted fish found in Hong Kong are from Bangladesh, Vietnam and Thailand. Therefore, the species used are not the same. According to Mr Wong:

Croakers were rare a few decades ago. The economic reform in China in the early 1980s gradually boosted domestic demand so less salted fish were supplied to Hong Kong. That forced Hong Kong to look for new production bases in South Asia. Salted fish makers found that Bangladesh was teeming with quality croakers, so they began to import them massively from there. At the same time, the supply of threadfins remained stable. However, the range of salted fish species has decreased. Now we have mainly threadfins, croakers, white pomfrets, silver moonies and Malabar red snappers. You could buy many more types of salted fish a long time ago — any fish could be salted — but not now. Salted red snappers and pomfrets are not found anymore.

The heyday of the salted fish industry was from 1950 to the 1970s. From Mui Fong Street, Eastern Street to Des Voeux Road West, there were salted fish shops on both sides of the streets. As Mr Wong remembers, “salted fish was the only smell on the street.” This area became known locally as “Salted Fish Hood”. Veteran staff members at the Hop Lee salted fish shop are immensely proud to recall that best of times. “The sea was right in front of the shop,” one of them pointed outside. “Fishermen brought the fish right there, once they were pulled out of the water.” Of course, the old buildings in Sai Ying Pun have a special layout for salted fish shops, with a processing workshop and a rooftop for curing and drying fish. Town planning today obviously does not cater for such uses.

Combined with a declining local catch and lack of “new blood”, the salted fish industry is dwindling fast. Today on Des Voeux Road West, there are only a couple of wholesalers and a few scattered retailers (Photo 7). “The rent is too high. When one shop opens, another shuts down,” a retailer grieved. Nowadays, the thriving dried seafood trade plays a leading role on Des Voeux

Road West. Initiated by the Hong Kong Chinese Medicine Merchants Association and supported by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, in 2000 Des Voeux Road West was officially crowned “Dried Seafood Street”. From then on the folk name “Salted Fish Hood” gradually disappeared.

The supplies to and sales in markets in both mainland China and Hong Kong are actually shrinking. National income has increased since the economic reform that began in the 1980s, and the fish harvested along China’s coastline now goes for domestic consumption. A higher living standard leads to a growing demand for fresh seafood, and less salted fish are wanted. Mr Wong knew the situation very well, “In the past we ordered the salted fish from China,” he said. “Ng Fung Hong was our agent to import salted fish, which were then auctioned to us. After the 1980s, our trade with the mainland gradually died out.” In Hong Kong, decreasing catches, wealthier lifestyles, urban space design, and a changing diet are killing the industry. Ironically, the price of salted fish has not come down but has rather increased 40–50% over the past two years. During the Chinese New Year of 2011, for example, white pomfret was sold at over USD 50 per kg, mainly because of a rise in production costs. Mr Wong told what it is like in Bangladesh: “Fish is pricier because of a worsened catch, and more expensive items in the production chain, such as salt and paper boxes. With revision of Bangladesh’s labour laws and labour competition among investors, Hong Kong salted fish makers have to pay more for manpower.” Yet the biggest crisis faced by the Hong Kong salted fish industry is discontinuity. Experienced salted fish makers have to train workers in Bangladesh and Vietnam to make salted fish instead.

The glorious days are gone and trade is diminishing, but those left in the trade have stood fast against the storm and are upbeat. Loyal old patrons still contribute to part of their sales, and the traditional mode of fish auctioning persists. A distributor would auction the food products to the retailers, who then sell them throughout the community. Taking charge of the whole auction, the distributor holds an abacus with a covered bottom awaiting the highest bid. One by one, the buyers come over and enter their bid price into the abacus, with its covered bottom facing the crowd so that only the distributor knows all the bids (Fig. 8). The price



**Figure 7.** Hup Lei, another large salted fish shop in Sheung Wan.



**Figure 8.** A salted fish auction in Yuen Shing Hong. The distributor is holding an abacus with a covered bottom and the buyer is entering the price.

is disclosed only when he announces the successful deal. As opposed to computerized buying and selling, fish auctions have a style all their own in this high-tech society, upholding a practice that has lasted for half a century.

### Chinese herbal medicine — Pak Cheong Tong

Shark fins, fish maws, natural agarwood, cinnamon sticks and other dried goods may exist beyond the realm of our normal sense and imagination. Each commodity in the Nam Pak Hong area of Sheung Wan can be an interesting topic in modernology. Next we examine a Chinese herbal drugstore, one among many century-old shops in Sheung Wan.

On Bonham Strand West there is an impressive three-storey building with a gracefully embellished shop sign and huge wooden couplets on both sides of the front door — “Pak Cheong Tong” (Fig. 9). The couplets mean “Pak Cheong Tong Pearl Powder and Camphor” and “Pak Cheong Tong Ginseng, Deer Antler and Cinnamon” respectively, which indicate the main products sold at the shop. “The couplets were from Guangzhou and relocated to Hong Kong,” said shop owner, Mr Tsang.

Pak Cheong Tong is more than a century old. As recalled by Mr Tsang, the shop started in Guangzhou and moved to Hong Kong in the 1920s. The shop has been at the same address since 1920, and still sells a similar range of medicinal products as it did then.

Upon entering the shop you first see small boxes of bottled and reasonably priced Macaque Calculus Powder placed in front of all the pricey medicines (Fig. 10). Before coming to Hong Kong, Mr Tsang’s grandparents had been making the powder in Guangzhou. At first it was used only within the household to soothe the children after they had nightmares. Later, people in the neighbourhood often asked for the powder, and so it was bottled and sold at a reasonable price.

Mr Tsang’s shop is certainly a living witness of the Chinese medicine trade in Nam Pak Hong. Anyone stepping into the shop would be immediately intrigued by a strong aroma, yet find it hard to identify. Camphor, also called “Plum Flakes” or “Dragon’s Brain”, is one of the featured medicinal products of Pak Cheong Tong. Camphor is a colourless solidified gum secreted from wounds on camphor trees. It is often used as an insect repellent. From the Chinese medical classics “Compendium of Materia Medica in the 16th century and Revised Materia Medica of the Tang Dynasty” in the seventh century, it can be seen that camphor has been long and widely used to ease strokes and locked jaws. Camphor trees are native to Southeast Asia, and camphor has been much sought after by Europeans since the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.



**Figure 9.** The large couplets on both sides of the front door of Pak Cheong Tong indicate that pearl powder, camphor, ginseng, deer antler and cinnamon are the main products sold by this shop.



**Figure 10.** The gracious interior of Pak Cheong Tong provides a harmonious setting for the Chinese medicine trade.

“Except for camphor, Chinese medicines in Pak Cheong Tong are mostly wholesaled or dispensed,” said Mr Tsang. Imported raw materials are sorted and processed in the shop before being sold to pharmaceutical manufacturers. Only a small amount of medicines are retailed. Among wholesalers, Pak Cheong Tong seems to have the most outstanding selection of medicines, such as the resuscitative drugs of ambergris, amber, musk, and camphor that help in directing curative effects to the unwell parts of the body; whereas pearl, “Horse’s Gem” and “Macaque Stone” relieve nervousness (Figs. 11 and 12). The names of some priceless medicines of olden times are hand-written clearly on four antique delivery orders hanging high on the wall. There are of course medicines from all over the world, including Tibetan saffron, Yunnan amber and Tianzhou notoginseng; deer products such as pilose antler from eastern Japan, “three-family” elk horn and deer tail from northern China;



**Figure 11.** Macaque calculus powder sold in Pak Cheong Tong. It is made from the calculus of macaque stomach, liver or gallbladder. It is usually made into powder to calm children who cry often.



**Figure 12.** Horse calculus is made from stones occurring in the gastrointestinal track of a horse. It is usually round in shape and white. In Chinese medicine, horse calculus is a tranquillizer and can remove heat and toxicity. Usually it is taken as a powder.



Figure 13. Wu Daorong's rhyming couplet.

as well as the six kinds of ginseng, including wood-grown ginseng, North Korean ginseng, Jilin sand ginseng, Shizhu ginseng, Siberian ginseng, and American ginseng. In Sheung Wan, traditional Chinese medicine stores other than Pak Cheong Tong are worth a good look into because any such store here is a living classroom for Chinese culture and liberal studies.

Last but not least is the rhyming couplet in the store. Opposite the glass counter with all kinds of precious medicines there is another couplet on the wall that means "nostrum for guests as noble as azure dragons" and "fine medicine for immortals as elegant as white deer" (Fig. 13). It was written by Wu Daorong in August 1932 exclusively for Pak Cheong Tong. Wu was a renowned late-19<sup>th</sup> century scholar. Having his compliments implies that Pak Cheong Tong is superior among its competitors. In between the couplet is a Chinese calligraphic painting. The rosewood furniture below makes the décor of the store even more artistic.

As this example demonstrates, modernology does not provide comprehensive reflection and analysis of the history, but a glimpse of the fragmentary information and stories of Pak Cheong Tong here and there gives us hints regarding a fuller picture of the years that it has been through. Another episode in the 1920s will illustrate what we mean. Pak Cheong Tong used to hand out medicine to the

poor. This practice is an earlier version of today's corporate social responsibility and a historical testimony of the geopolitical relationship between Hong Kong, Guangdong and Macau.

The disappearance of some precious medicinal materials in drug production also has a story to tell. Ambergris, for instance, is a medicine as well as an essential ingredient in perfumery. Because natural ambergris is difficult to acquire, and because a synthetic fixative is becoming more common, it is now a rarity in traditional drug stores.

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