

Art Intervention in Hong Kong Rural Revitalization Based on Symbiosis: The Case of Lai Chi Wo

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Abstract: Based on the national conditions and the demand of the times, “Beautiful Countryside Construction” has become common sense in rural revitalization in Greater China. Art is believed to be an effective way to intervene and make a difference in this process. However, art intervention is confronted with challenges in rural renewal due to its hysteretic nature and people’s diverging perceptions in understanding and accepting arts. This is especially true with Hong Kong, a hub of drastic economic and cultural interactions. To solve these contradictions art intervention meets in rural areas, the notions of Symbiosis can be instructive through its essence of coordination and mutualism. Lai Chi Wo in Hong Kong has made active and effective efforts to revitalize its rural development with art intervention that shows the philosophy of symbiosis. The symbiotic art intervention features in the conservation of distinctive cultural traditions, the coordination of multiple stakeholders, dynamic adaption to changes, the openness in face of contradictions, a holistic view in planning and implementing, and harmony with nature. In its practice backed up by the Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme, Lai Chi Wo performs well from the above-mentioned dimensions to release its art potential through the improvement of the rural landscape, the design of public service, and the product packing. Although Lai Chi Wo still has a way to go in further releasing residents’ initiative, it offers an instructive model of symbiosis-based art intervention in rural revitalization.

Keywords: Art intervention, Symbiosis, Hong Kong rural revitalization, Lai Chi Wo.

1. Introduction

Today’s “beautiful countryside” initiative in Greater China is expanding emphasis on art intervention in revitalizing rural areas. “Rural revitalization through art” aims to restructure interpersonal relationships in the rural areas and trigger its endogenous motivation for effective rural governance and revitalization (Chen, 2021). Art, in this context, is a catalyst to energize rural development with thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, effective governance, and prosperity.

However, compared with other sectors in revitalizing rural villages, art is confronted with a more complicated situation in this cause. Contradictions from both external and internal have been creating difficulties in art intervention and its symbiosis with traditional rural villages. In addition to the resistance from the interpersonal block, the single industry, environmental imbalance, and cultural dislocation that commonly occur in rural revitalization (Chen, 2021), the art-intervening practice faces further challenges from the protracted nature of art and the remarkably diverging perceptions of art among different groups.

This is especially true with Hong Kong, a global hub standing at the crossroad between the east and the west, tradition and modernity for its unique geographical and historical causes. Since the 1990s, especially with the release of the *Rural Planning and Improvement Strategy*, rural village transformation has been taking place in Hong Kong with fruitful achievements. This study intends to focus on a successful case of Lai Chi Wo for exploring the effective modes of art intervention in rural revitalization based on the notion of symbiosis.

2. Art Intervention and Symbiosis

2.1. Art Intervention

Hadas Ophrat (2022: 2-3) defines art intervention as “an expression of local initiatives by artists, collectives, and art centers wishing to influence the design of the space or make a change in its lifestyle”. It is a kind of purposeful action with social participation that attempts to change the urban landscape through artistic creation.

Its occurrence is rooted in the evolution of the purpose of art. Throughout art history, the purpose of art experienced a transfer from for religion to for individuals, and to for the public (Peter, 2006). This transition entrusts art with a public mission to influence the social landscape. Art intervention, as a direct approach, has been intensified since the mid-1990s. It was initially discussed against the background of urbanization and the emergence of “public space”, but now it also frequently appears in the context of rural revitalization in the new urbanizing phase.

Art intervention in the urban and rural development has become normal in China since 1960s, with structural transformation in society and economy and the development of cultural industry. It also attracts increasing attention from academic circle to research on effective strategies to fully release its potential in rural revitalization. Researchers like Fang Lili (2018) and Qu Yan (2020) advanced discussion the possibility of art intervention in China’s rural renewal from a theoretical approach, while more case studies have been done for practical instructions, including cases from rural villages in mainland China (Wang, 2019; Liu 2017) and in Taiwan, China (Chen & Gao, 2016). There are also comparative studies of domestic rural villages and those overseas (Chen, Qian & Wang, 2016).

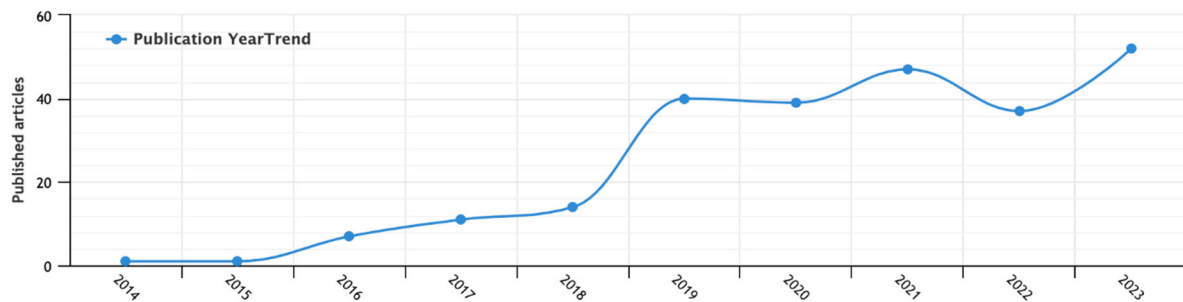


Table 1. Publication Year Trend on “Art intervention in Rural Revitalization” in CNKI Database

However, studies on Hong Kong’s art intervention practice in rural revitalization remain inadequate, though positive and fruitful practice have been conducted in Lai Chi Wo, Yim Tin Tsai, Lamma Island and so on. That is why this study intends to focus on the case of Lai Chi Wo in Hong Kong. In addition to the discussions on the possibility for art to intervene in rural development, it is equally or even more crucial dig out and give play to the long period value of art in intervention rural renewal by implanting it into the texture of rural development. The notion of “symbiosis”, therefore, can provide some guidelines.

2.2. Symbiosis

“Symbiosis” is a term put forward by German botanist and mycologist Heinrich Anton de Bary in a biological context to refer to “a phenomenon in which dissimilar organisms live together (Oulhen, Schulz, and Carrier, 2016). The mutualism feature was then applied to a broader social context in dealing with complex social problems.

Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa epitomized the idea of symbiosis in architecture by establishing architectural symbiotic theory, which draws upon symbiotic thought from Buddhism and biology. Kurokawa’s perception of symbiosis indicates a creative and constructive relationship through opposition for a new type of mutualism based on necessary mutual understanding and affirmation (Kurokawa, 1994: 6-7).

The notion of symbiosis is accordance with classic Chinese philosophy in perceiving the texture and development of the world and understanding human-nature and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, symbiosis is accepted and applied by Chinese researchers in the study of the urban and rural development. Among them, Zhao Yang (2020) conducted a systematic study on symbiosis in the rural revitalization through art by mapping the framework of how symbiosis instructs art to intervene in rural revitalization. Zhao points out several principles for art intervention in rural villages based on a symbiotic thought:

The notion “sacred zone” sets a premise for art intervention to respect the unique cultural traditions owned by the villagers;

The notion of “intermediate domain” shows the possibility of seeking common ground among different groups for mutual benefits;

The diachronicity and synchronicity require a dynamic and developing view to vitalize the spatial values;

“Heterogeneous cultural symbiosis” indicates a balanced and coordinative manner in face of “otherness” and contradictions;

“Sub-integrity” refers to whole-and-partial integrity in reshaping the art landscape;

“Symbiosis between Man and Nature” further stresses the obedience to natural rules.

These six principles from symbiosis provide a set of criterion to evaluate the effects of art intervention in rural revitalization in terms of its rationality and sustainability. To sum up, it provides six dimensions to assess the effects of art intervention in rural revitalization, which forms the theoretical framework of this case study:

- 1) conservation of distinctive cultural traditions
- 2) coordination of multiple stakeholders
- 3) dynamic adaption to changes
- 4) openness in face of contradictions
- 5) a holistic view in planning and implementing
- 6) harmony with nature.

3. Overview of Hong Kong Rural Areas and Rural Revitalization

Though Hong Kong is a place known for its modern and international characteristics, its rural areas constitute a crucial part of this metropolis with its vast territory and cultural heritage. Hong Kong owns approximately 700 villages, covering 3/4 of the total land in this region (LegCo of the HKSAR, 2022; Li & He, 2019). The rural areas in Hong Kong mainly refer to the New Territories and there are also some rural villages scattered on this land. Hong Kong indigenous peoples can be traced to 900 A.D. in the Song Dynasty, most of whom lived in the coastal areas of northwest Hong Kong (Li & He, 2022).

Just like many other villages in the intensified modernization, these villages in Hong Kong are also confronted with such challenges as the depopulation and aging society, the recession of their pillar industry and the cultural shock (Li & He, 2022). However, changes are taking place here in a more drastic way, which results from the intensive interactions out of the historical and geographical exclusiveness of Hong Kong. From the pre-colonial era to the British rule and to its return, the changing economy, culture and land policies and rules in Hong Kong keep bringing uncertainty in the rural development and challenges to coordinate all involved parties. Also, overseas trading causes water pollution in this global transportation hub, bringing irreversible damage to fishery and salt industry that coastal villages live on (Li & He, 2022). More importantly, cultural traditions preserved in the rural villages are threatened by domestic and international migrations as well as shortsighted tourism.

It can be seen from the above-mentioned dilemma

confronting Hong Kong that the key to its rural revitalization lies in long-run coordination, or symbiosis.

4. Case Study: Art Intervention in Lai Chi Wo's Rural Revitalization

4.1. Overview of Lai Chi Wo

Located in the northeast of the New Territories, Lai Chi Wo is a historic Hakka village built more than 300 years ago. It is one of Hong Kong's oldest, largest and best-preserved rural settlements and was a recipient of the prestigious 2020 Special Recognition for Sustainable Development award by UNESCO for promoting cultural heritage conservation (Rural Sustainability, 2023).

Lai Chi Wo lies in an advantageous location in Hong Kong, backed by mountains and facing the sea. Its geographical advantage endows it with various living organisms and rich ecological resources in diversified habitats, including shrub land, freshwater streams, agricultural wetland, mangrove and mud flat (Rural Sustainability, 2023)

The bountiful natural resources nurture the local residents and their culture. As the previous home to more than 1000 residents, mostly from Hakka ethnic group, Lai Chi Wo suffered from a sharp population beginning in the 1960s because the residents left for the urban areas in search of job opportunities or migrated overseas to establish new lives and careers (Hong Kong Geopark, 2023). By 2010, only one or two elderly villagers remained in Lai Chi Wo.

To cope with the development plight in Lai Chi Wo and revitalize its rich natural and cultural resources, the Policy for Sustainability Lab (PSL) launched the multi-year Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme in 2013 (Rural Sustainability, 2023). This project attracted interested public members, stakeholders and organizations with a shared vision for rural sustainability. Remarkable achievements have been attained to combat the loss of village cultural traditions, the degradation of the natural and social landscape there against urbanization, which set an inspiring example for rural revitalization for Hong Kong, Greater China and the world (Rural Sustainability, 2023). Amid this process, art is intervening in a positive manner.

4.2. Art Intervention in Lai Chi Wo

4.2.1. Participating subjects

Rural revitalization in Lai Chi Wo adopts a collaborative model via joint conservation by social elites (Li & He, 2022). This project is launched by Policy for Sustainability Lab, the University of Hong Kong, in collaboration with NGOs (Hong Kong Countryside Foundation, Produce Green Foundation and The Conservancy Association), government agencies, business corporations (The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited) and local villagers (Rural Sustainability, 2023)

The participating subjects are even more extensive when art intervenes through the co-creation art projects, which is indicated in the chart below (Rural Sustainability, 2023):

Table 2. Art co-creation projects in Lai Chi Wo

Project	Project Proponent	Project Collaborator
Murmur of the Brick: Rurally Engaged Art	Art for All Hong Kong Charitable Community Arts Organization	Caritas Lung Yeuk Tau Community Development Scheme Artists Team Technical Team
"On Earth" Ceramics Festival	Rachel Cheung, Suzanne Au, Dexter Lee, Yiu Chun Wa	villagers
"Nature, Earth and Human" Mui Tsz Lam Art Revitalization Project	Association for Sha Tau Kok Culture and Ecology	HKTraveler Executive Team Mural Curator Creative Team
The Common Map: A mapping database of village stories	Chris Choi, Tsz Yiu	villagers and farmers
Homey Mui Tsz Lam	The Common Map	villagers
Star Countryside Singing Tour	Autistic Child Life Building Development	Heidi Music Hong Kong villagers
Restored Village Complex	Policy for Sustainability Lab, Centre for Civil Society and Governance, The University of Hong Kong	The Centre for Architectural Heritage Research, The Chinese University of Hong Kong villagers

It should be noted that the art co-creation projects have diversified proponent and collaborator groups with wide social participation. Villagers and local residents actively engaged in the projects as collaborators. However, they rarely initiated the art project as proponents and government appears to be absent from these art co-creation projects.

4.2.2. Cause of intervention

The Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme has clear and

certain objectives in the rural revitalization practice (Rural Sustainability, 2023):

To initiate a whole catchment management approach for biodiversity conservation

To revitalize agricultural activities by adopting innovative farming methods

To re-discover the community resources and facilitate appropriate use

To develop the village as an environmental and sustainable development education hub

To develop diverse local products and services, thereby creating job opportunities and financial returns to sustain the local economy

Art intervention in Lai Chi Wo also shows a purposeful and planned characteristic in accordance with the programme objectives. To be specific, the causes of intervention in Lai Chi Wo are indicated in the following aspects:

Artistic creation: to encourage expression of local beauty with suitable and attractive artistic forms and to improve the village art landscape;

Artistic education: to promote understanding of local culture and pass on traditions;

Artistic transaction: to energize creative economy by developing aesthetic products with value added.

Art communication: to inspire exchanges of urban-rural or rural-rural cultures and ideas.

4.2.3. Ways of intervention

Art intervenes in Lai Chi Wo's rural revitalization mainly through the improvement of rural landscape, the design of public service and the product packing and marketing.

The improvement of rural landscape—Art plays an important role in improving the rural landscape with its aesthetic nature. The most successful intervention of art in Lai Chi Wo's rural revitalization is demonstrated by the village complex restoration project initiated Policy for Sustainability Lab, Centre for Civil Society and Governance, The University of Hong Kong. This is pilot co-creation to employ traditional Chinese house building techniques and local materials such as sand, mud, rice straw and oyster shells to restore the outlook of the complex. Also, the newly rising or restored architecture such as the Homey Mui Tsz Lam equally contributes to the improvement of rural landscape.

The design of public service—This is a comprehensive field where art makes a difference. The art intervening public service includes art exhibitions, co-creation projects and art festivals. For example, the rurally engaged art installation project “Murmur of the Brick” encourages participants to use traditional and innovative hand-woven fabric in the interactive old village house to feel and understand Hakka culture tradition and the values of rural villages in the contemporary society; “On Earth” Lai Chi Wo Art Project also offers a communal platform for encouraging creative thinking for this village by jointly developing Hakka cuisine and learning the ceramics techniques. In these cases, art participates in revitalizing the cultural traditions, both tangible and intangible, and brings people together.

Product packing and marketing—This is an indirect yet effective way for art intervention. Products developed in rural revitalization like produce packing and promotional brochure design is in demand for art. The effective intervention of art design in product packing and marketing can bring visible earnings. For example, effective efforts have been made in designing the packing of locally produced flavored tea and the hand-drawing map for the Village Tour 2021. These visual design with artistic and aesthetic value condenses the local cultural elements while positively influences the products' marketing and public acceptance.

4.3. Evaluation of Art Intervention in Lai Chi Wo Based on Symbiosis

Lai Chi Wo's art intervention practice in its rural revitalization obtains an overall success in spite of some deficiencies, assessed by the previously mentioned six dimensions in Symbiosis.

4.3.1. Successful Practice

Firstly, art intervention in Lai Chi Wo is based on respect for and adherence to its local distinctive culture. From the “On Earth” Lai Chi Wo Art Project to “Murmur of the Brick” Art Project, what have been the focus of art intervention are the Hakka culture and traditions, which are the “sacred domain” in this cultural symbiotic system.

Secondly, art intervention in Lai Chi Wo motivates the active participation of different social groups. It establishes a collaborative platform with the engagement of Universities, NGOs, government agencies, business corporations and residents. More importantly, most art projects run smoothly and coordinatively.

Thirdly, the Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme (2013-2017) is a periodical programme open to changes in the new situation, which is expected to dynamic adaptation to the ways and priorities in which art intervenes.

Fourthly, the holistic view in planning and implementing art intervention is fully shown in the launching of the Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme and the co-creation art projects. The Programme provides top-down instructions on the visions and mission of Lai Chi Wo's rural revitalization while allocating social resources from a centralized stance. Meanwhile, the Programme also facilitates the bottom-up art co-creation project with wider proponent and collaborator subjects.

Last but not the least, art intervention in Lai Chi Wo attaches importance to the co-existence of humans and nature. It is manifested in the localization idea in its artistic practice, such as the application of local natural resources in the complex restoration.

4.3.2. Deficiencies and Suggestions

There is also something to be improved in Lai Chi Wo's art intervention. For one thing, the local residents is still in lack of initiative and leadership in the art practice. It is far from enough for them to merely engage as passive participants following the plan of professional artists or activists. Instead, they should become the vital force of rural art creation, because they are most crucial stakeholders. For another thing, the current art intervention in Lai Chi Wo remains vulnerable to the contradictions like the resistance of local residents and potential invasion of other new thoughts.

A possible solution to both these two deficiencies is to promote the posture changing of local residents. In rural revitalization, residents are in most cases at the margin of the collaborative network to receive the so-called social assistance and support. This passive posture cannot be changed until they have access and initiative to plan, create, and share. Here are some possible ways to achieve this transfer:

“resident-resident” mutual assistance: residents can share with others in the same village about their understanding and practice of artistic creation based on their shared cultural traditions; Also, those with effective and successful art practice can promote their experience to their brother villages via mutual help groups or other forms;

“resident-social group” feedback: residents can also join in the academic research and social production with their local knowledge, especially the non-heritage inheritors. For example, the non-heritage inheritors can serve as civil mentors or guest lecturers in universities.

These would build up their cultural confidence with a deeper understanding of their own culture. Their going out can also bring them an open mind in future social interactions amid rural revitalization.

5. Conclusion

This case study of Lai Chi Wo shows the possibility of art intervention in rural revitalization based on symbiosis. It has set a good example with its successful practice through the improvement of rural landscape, the design of public service and the product packing and marketing on the basis of consistent objectives with the Sustainable Lai Chi Wo Programme and the coordination of participating subjects. Lai Chi Wo’s art intervention adopts a collaborative model with wide social engagement of Universities, NGOs, government agencies, business corporation and local residents. The idea of symbiosis featuring mutualism plays a vital role in the coordination of stakeholders. Besides, it is equally important for art intervention to conserve the local distinctive cultural traditions, to keep pace to times, to stay open to contradictions, to plan and implement with a holistic view and to seek harmony with nature in rural revitalization. Although Lai Chi Wo still has a way to go in releasing local residents’ initiative and potential, it offers an instructive model of symbiosis-based art intervention in rural revitalization.

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