Strategies on Inheritance and Preservation of Crossing Tongji Bridge Social Custom in Foshan City

Wanjie Xu¹,a and Zhou Chen²,b

¹Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, Guangzhou, China
²Foshan University, School of Transportation and Civil Engineering & Architecture, Foshan, China

a my8828678@163.com, b 1335713746@qq.com

Keywords: Tongji Bridge; social custom; load capacity; inherit and preserve

Abstract: Tongji Bridge is one of well-known historical interests in Foshan city. Crossing Tongji Bridge social custom is the grand collective activity for local people. Under strong publicity of government departments, the popularity of crossing Tongji Bridge traditional folk culture has been increasingly grown year by year. However, it confronted failure twice being included in nation intangible cultural heritage list. On the other hand, during the peak period of crossing Tongji Bridge social custom, due to the limited load capacity of Tongji Bridge, it may cause potential risk such as stampedes, and even partly collapsing of Tongji Bridge. Aiming to better protect the bridge and help it successfully bidding for national intangible cultural heritage, the paper proposes some helpful strategies on how to protect the Tongji Bridge and also to inherit and preserve its social custom.

1 Introduction

Located in the center of downtown in Foshan City, Tongji Bridge enjoyed a great popularity national wide and even worldwide. The social custom of crossing Tongji Bridge on the 16\textsuperscript{th} of first month in china lunar calender has become a collective activity. In order to better publicize the urban folk culture of Foshan city, the local government managed to deeper explore the cultural connotations crossing Tongji Bridge social custom and maximize its influence. The related folk culture research associations on crossing Tongji Bridge social custom have been initiated in recent years. What’s more, the academic forum has regularly organized. Nowadays, thousands of people from all over the country even abroad, they walked across the same footbridge spontaneously on the same evening.

Thanks to the great and efficient publicity of the Foshan Municipal Government, a large scale of activity has been successfully held. The influence of Tongji Bridge custom also spread to southern Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao even including regions abroad. The remarkable social custom has drawn wider and greater attentions from scholars. They are engaged to study the inheritance and preservation of crossing Tongji Bridge social custom. Therefore, the protection and inheritance of folk culture has received more and more recognitions by sociology scholars and researchers. As a result, some scholars have conducted the relevant researches, such as A case study of Tongji custom in Foshan base on the context of intangible cultural heritage of restoration and heritagisation of folk custom published by Enwei Chen, a professor from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies [1], he highlighted the importance of protection of crossing Tongji Bridge custom. In addition, Fan Li, a professor from Foshan University, the Evolution of Urban Nostalgia and Multiple Participant’s Construction: A Case Study of Tongji Bridge in Foshan[2]. He initiated an urban nostalgia based on Tongji Brige.

2 General introductions of Tongji Bridge and its social custom

Tongji Bridge is regarded as one of important historical and cultural resource of Foshan city with a long history. Tongji Bridge is the first large wooden footbridge in Foshan. With the growing popularity and high publicity, the number of people who participated in crossing Tongji Bridge has
been growing rapidly every year. Crossing Tongji Bridge has played an important role in the production, protection, continuation and re-creation of intangible cultural heritage, thereby contributing to the enrichment of cultural diversity and human creativity.

2.1 The origin of the custom

According to historical documents, Tongji Bridge was built in the Ming Dynasty around 17th century, around 1625. In fact, its social custom is originated from the Central Plains of China—walking across the Bridge. In the old days, local students from Foshan went to Beijing to take imperial competitive exams by passing Tongji Bridge. Additionally, businessmen traveled and walked across Tongji Bridge. Crossing the bridge is considered as a must for the local people including students, businessmen and citizens. This bridge has gradually become a bridge with implied meaning of great fortune and good luck. In Chinese language, the word “Tong” are homophonic of fortune with a Chinese idiom Caiyunhengtong (known as the road to wealth is wide open—wishing you prosperity). Day by day, the local Foshan citizens believe that walking across the Tongji Bridge will bring them wealth and good fortune. Therefore, more and more people pray for blessings by walking through Tongji Bridge on the 16th day of the first month lunar calendar every year. Some people are seeking for fortune; some are asking for careers; some are longing for prosperity; others are wishing for everything well. In the hearts of local residents of Foshan city, “crossing Tongji Bridge” is a beneficial and helpful way of praying and realizing the anticipation for a happy life.

2.2 The tokens and taboos of the custom

When mentioning Tongji Bridge social custom, there are three prosperity tokens, festival lantern (hanging lanterns during the Spring Festival and Lantern Festival in order to add brilliance to the festival and good wish for good luck), wind chime (the local people strongly believe that wind chimes can call for good fortune), and lettuce (share the same pronunciation with grain profit and become wealthy). These three tokens specially represent the connotation of the custom.

It is generally acknowledged that there are three noticeable taboos in local Foshan areas when one is crossing the Tongji Bridge on that night. Taboo 1: Do not walk back, it means that one should follow a fixed route while walking across Tongji Bridge, one person must go from the bridge head (North Shore) to the end of the bridge (South Shore), otherwise it is considered unlucky. Taboo 2: Do not throw lettuces. Lettuce is the homonym of “generate” in the local Foshan dialect (a dialect similar to the Cantonese especially in pronunciation), commonly known as with the connotation of bringing you more wealth and fortune. It is considered auspicious to buy lettuces and take them back home. For this reason, they will take the lettuces home when they finished the Tongji Bridge custom. Taboo 3: Do not step on the threshold. When passing the Tongji Bridge archway, one can’t step on the threshold below the arch. Participant should be lifted up, otherwise it is considered unlucky. The number of people walking Tongji Bridge is growing every year. In order to avoid accidentally falling over while people passing the threshold during the peak period, which would lead to stampede, the threshold below the archway has been removed. The local residents have approved these three taboos for generations.

3. Analysis of existing drawbacks of the custom

According to the Hoffmann-Krayerof Swiss, the folklore is divided into 18 categories: the 9th type of categories, such as ritual process, association, and games, etc. [3] In this case, crossing Tongji Bridge social custom can be regarded as the ritual process in the folk classification. Folk culture has the nature of universality, inheritance and variability which attaches to the living, emotions and beliefs of people. Laclau hold the opinion that region recognition and regional identity is exoteric in nature, and vary by different factors, but not pure or constant [4]. Whether folk custom can be passed down depends on the national identity of the culture. In addition, folk culture contains variability. In the past, the actual cultural connotation of crossing Tongji Bridge social custom was to seek procreation instead of seeking wealth. In a word, any folk custom is an inevitable outcome of certain social development.
3.1 Failure of bidding for national intangible cultural heritage

In October 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization presided over the Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Tongji Bridge social custom is highlighted and also received more attentions. Based on this, the custom has enjoyed great achievements, which is shown in Table 1. Additionally, government departments at all levels in Guangdong province and Foshan city have made great efforts on bidding for intangible cultural heritage. Unfortunately, it failed to be included into the national intangible cultural heritage list in the year of 2007 and 2009 respectively, which leads to the reduction of number of people who participated in the custom. From Fig. 1, it presents a slight peak in 2009. To be more specific, according to the statistics leased officially, the number of people in 2009 has amounted to more than 700,000. After the second failure of bidding national intangible cultural heritage list in 2009, there is modest declining trend for the number of participants. To some extent, according to Fig.1 and Table 1, it can be included that the result of bidding national intangible cultural heritage has affected the amount of participants. In other words, the successes of bidding intangible cultural heritage accelerated the increasing of participants and social concern, but vise versa. Therefore, it is of great significance to dapperly preserve the custom so as to achieve to be included in the national intangible cultural heritage list in the future.

![Figure 1. Relationship between number of people and year.](image)

| Year   | Bidding                                                      | Rank    | Result  |
|--------|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------|---------|
| 2006   | Foshan Chancheng District Intangible Cultural Heritage List  | district| succeed |
| 2007   | Foshan Intangible Cultural Heritage List                     | municipal| succeed |
| 2007   | National Intangible Cultural Heritage List                   | national | failed  |
| 2008   | Guangdong Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage List       | provincial| succeed |
| 2009   | National Intangible Cultural Heritage List                   | national | failed  |

However, it is noted that the influence and popularity of the custom is growing. According to the latest data, it was calculated that in 2019, the number of people who were walking through Tongji Bridge had amounted to 795,200, an increase of more than 50,000 people compared with last year, which also attracted numerous oversea tourists to join in. In general, from the data presented in Fig.1, the number of participants shows a growing trend after the year of 2011, which can be interpreted that the custom has gained greater recognition in the local city together with the Guangdong province national wide and even worldwide.

3.2 Limited load capacity of Tongji Bridge

Every year on the 16th of the first month of lunar calendar, the participants began to gather at six in the evening and it become obviously crowded which will lead to the peak of human traffic at 10 o'clock in the evening. Numerous residents who were walking across the bridges in a concentrated time, great risk would be deduced as for a hundred-year-old ancient Bridge. In a word, there are certain security risks. During the walking process, pedestrians neither always walk in the same state nor follow the same routine, in that pedestrians’ walking is affected by psychological factors and the surrounding environment. In this case, there are uncertainties in the mechanism of human-induced resonance of bridges. When a pedestrian walks on a structure such as a bridge and feels excessive
vibration, some adjustments are made, including changing the direction of routine, speed, stride frequency, synchronization ratio, and step distance. Not only the load capacity of the bridge should be considered, but the footbridge collapse can be induced at any time. In addition, large-scale crowds walking the Tongji Bridge may cause accidents such as stamping.

4 Strategies on Inheritance and Preservation of the Custom

The typical grand crossing Tongji folk custom in Foshan was originally rooted in the daily life of local residents. Great changes have been taken place through several political campaigns. Finally, the custom became a veritable cultural relic as part of their social life. Now, it is social collective activity led by the government and spontaneously involved by the people. In fact, this is a way of cultural sharing and cultural exchange. Tongji Bridge provides the participants a site for them to gain region recognition and a sense for security to pray for good wishes in the Chinese New Year. In a word, the custom is created and inherited by the people in Foshan community.

4.1 Carry out Joint Education and Scientific Research

According to the previous study, education on culture is proved to be an effective way to inherit traditional culture or social norms. Christia Hajisoteriou & Panayiotis Angelides proposed that students should be provided with multicultural education [5]. First of all, students from Hong Kong, Macao and even overseas are education with related cultural background and they are supposed to travel and visit Tongji Bridge in Foshan city. Second, an education base is jointly built for the study and investigation of Tongji Bridge custom in Foshan city. It is convenient for students to inherit and study the history and culture of the typical folk customs. Third, the academic forum on Foshan Tongji Bridge custom is regularly organized and an active academic atmosphere. People from all walks of life including well-known national writers, scholars who study Lingnan culture and figures with great social influence are invited to participate in the custom.

4.2 Rebuild the Bridge and Turn It into a Cultural Relic Protection

Tongji Bridge is known as the name card of Foshan city which is actually one of valuable treasures. In the 1950s, due to river siltation, the river under the Tongji Bridge became a dark ditch over time. Later on, Tongji Bridge was transformed into wood-rock mixed structure after reconstructions a few times of the bridges, resulting from floods and damaged dam. Consequently, on January 18, 2001, Tongji Bridge was presented to the world with a brand new look.

At present, Tongji Bridge is a public leisure place in the downtown of Foshan city. The residents can go in and out at any time and exercise in the morning or jogging in the late afternoon. As a matter of fact that Tongji Bridge is not a tourist attraction. This paper proposes that it is necessary to protect the Tongji Bridge and regularly monitor and maintain the Tongji Bridge. According to the results of the bridge scientific inspection, the Tongji Bridge can be reconstructed into a tourist attraction and listed as a cultural relic protection cite so that the footbridge can be better protected. Only in these ways mentioned above can the Tongji Bridge is preserved. No matter in what condition, the traditional custom should be carried out and passed from generation to generation.

4.3 Conduct Monitoring and Evaluation for Tongji Bridge

Under the experimental conditions of loading in experimental tests, the influence of the resonance response of the Tongji Bridge body under the action of large-scale crowd excitation, it is obtained the pre-evaluation its loading capacity of the Tongji Bridge. Finally, the reinforcement, protection, overhaul and transformation plan and implementation method of Tongji Bridge are proposed. On the other hand, to improve the safety coefficient of crossing Tongji Bridge social custom on that night, the simulation method is adapted to create a mathematical model, simulate the crowd walking through the bridge body the peak, so as to study the anti-vibration conditions of Tongji Bridge under the incentive of large amount of crowds. After calculation, it is supposed to investigate and find out the potential risk of stepping on the footbridge and the anti-vibration and disaster resistance of the bridge body.
5. Conclusions

As social economy developed rapidly, there have been many forms of media for new media operating. In the new cultural environment, adapting traditional social custom and folk culture can exert its cultural functions and meet the requirements in the new era. However, it has confronted two failures in biding national intangible cultural heritage list. The paper finds out that the result of bidding for national intangible cultural heritage has affected the amount of participants. Therefore, the paper proposes some strategies on inheritance and preservation of the custom including first solution: rebuild the bridge and turn it into a cultural relic protection, second solution: carry out scientific research and join education and the third solution: conduct monitoring and evaluation for Tongji Bridge aiming to help the success of bidding for national intangible cultural heritage. Eventually, all those efforts can be contributed to gain greater competence and better preserved the custom.

References

[1] Enwei Chen, In the context of intangible cultural heritage of the restoration and heritagisation of folk custom—a case study of Xingtongji Custom in Foshan. [J]. The central plains culture research, 2017 18 (5) 122-128.

[2] Fan Li, Jianbo Yang, Wei Huang. The evolution of urban nostalgia and multiple participant’s construction: a case study of tongji bridge in Foshan [J]. 2015 145 (5)29-37.

[3] Hoffmann-Krayer, E., Bachtold-Staubli, Hanns. Handwörterbuch des deustchen Aberglaubens Berlin and Leiqzig [M].1927(8) 37-41.

[4] Laclau E. New reflection on the revolution of our time [M]. London:Verso, 1990 (12)18-20.

[5] Christia Hajisoteriou &Panayiotis Angelides, The politics of intercultural education in Cyprus [J]. Education Inquiry. 2013 (4) 103-123.