

Old Hong Kong's New Face

By Malia Politzer

CHEUNG CHAU ISLAND, Hong Kong—At the stroke of midnight on this little island in the South China Sea, 11 men—and one hardy woman—scrambled up a 46-foot high tower piled high with fluffy white buns, while thousands cheered them on.

The Cheung Chau Bun Festival, one of the liveliest full-day Taoist holidays still celebrated in this work-hard, play-hard territory, still drew a crowd last Thursday. But like so many other Hong Kong traditions, it's caught in a tradition-versus-modernization debate that's hard to miss.

After an early rain spoiled some of the buns last year—officially rendering the tower unattractive and unsafe—the government announced that the “old” buns had to go. They have been replaced by 8,000 gleaming new ones, made exactly the same size, weight, color and shape, with one small change: Now the buns are plastic.

Swapping bread for plastic may seem like a small thing, but for many Hong Kong conservationists, it's symptomatic of a larger debate. Just how far is the government willing to go to sanitize and modernize, and at what cost? How much is Hong Kong's cultural heritage worth?

It's an issue that's catching fire in Hong Kong's public debate. Last year, the government ripped down the Star Ferry Pier tower, a visual touchstone of historical Hong Kong that has appeared in numerous Hollywood films and tourist photos. Authorities evicted a street of wedding card businesses—a famous haunt for newly engaged couples—to build residential towers. And the famous Bauhaus-style Wan Chai outdoor market, said to be one of the only two such markets in existence in the entire world, is scheduled to be whittled down to half its original size to make room for a new building.

Of course, some sacrifices must be made in the interest of economic development. But are tasty buns really a threat to modernization?

This isn't to say that Cheung Chau's customs haven't already changed quite a bit. The week-long celebration of the Taoist god Pak Tai, the God of the Sea, has its origins in the 1890s, when survivors of the bubonic plague offered sweet buns to assuage the ghosts of those who

had been killed by plague and pirates, in exchange for protection. In the past, the climb was a free-for-all, where men from Cheung Chau village competed to climb up three bamboo towers covered with the pastries, trying to grab as many as possible in order to bring luck to their families. But Hong Kong's former British colonial masters forbid the practice after one of the towers collapsed in 1978, injuring many.

It wasn't until 2005, back under Chinese rule, that the Hong Kong government reauthorized the bun scramble to promote Cheung Chau's heritage and to attract tourists to the island. But strict safety regulations now ap-



A great future in plastics?

plied. No longer would locals be left to build the bun-tower frame out of bamboo. Instead, Hong Kong authorities commissioned engineers to build the 46-foot climbing tower out of steel. These days, hopeful competitors must undergo safety training, and all participants are required to wear harnesses and ropes. Despite such regulations, the number of people vying to compete hasn't diminished: This year, organizers had to whittle down the throng of 149 aspiring bun winners to just 12 contestants.

Pushing through the masses, I made my way to a little shop along Pak She Street to find out what the master bun-maker Kwok Kam-Chuen thought about the festival's new twist. Mr. Kwok, 58, spent eight days making more than 50,000 buns for the week-long holiday. Stuffed

with sesame paste or lotus, the sugar-filled buns are stamped with the red Chinese character depicting peace, and are meant to bring good luck.

This year, Mr. Kwok's creations were most prominently featured at the square in front of Pak Tai temple, where the three original bamboo towers sat piled high with more than 6,000 of the fluffy white buns. The plastic buns “offend tradition,” Mr. Kwok said. “Why would the ghosts eat plastic buns?” added Cheung Chau native Au Loy Kwai, one of five neighborhood organizers who helped to build floats for this year's parade. “They are cheating the ghosts and the gods!”

This isn't the first time Hong Kong government safety regulations have trod on local customs. Earlier this year, authorities built a yellow steel fence around a famous wishing tree after a branch fell and injured an elderly man. Now, instead of throwing New Year's wishes tied to fruit at the tree, as was once customary, local celebrators and tourists have to wait in line to hand their colorful slips of paper to an intermediary, who then ties the wishes to metal pegs by a wooden board reading “May you flourish in your studies.” Tourist traffic promptly dropped by as much as 70%, according to local newspapers.

Back on Cheung Chau, some locals—like Lee Siu Yan, a 44-year-old Cheung Chau native and owner of a small fishing shop—watched this year's adaptations to the Bun Festival warily, fearing a similar public reaction to change. “These traditions are what draw people to come here—if they are gone, no one will come,” said Mr. Lee.

It hasn't affected the crowds just yet. As the bun race neared, 1,500 fans settled into plastic chairs placed in the local soccer field for a view of the scramble. After a gong sounded the start, the 12 contestants started their no-handhold dash up the 40 feet of bun-studded monolith, frantically stuffing buns into sacks harnessed onto their backs.

After only three minutes, they were back on the ground. The more than 100 year-old tradition may not have been true to the original, but the crowds still seemed satisfied—for now.

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