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The Future Will Remember: A Historical Approach to Restoring Muffled Voices in Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory: The Macau Experience

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Abstract: Using the case of Macau's joss-stick manufacturing, this study contributes to existing dialogue on issues surrounding the institutionalisation of ICH safeguarding and the consequential devitalisation of intangible values in the process of inventory. Through a close analysis of official documents, old English- and Chinese-language newspapers, pre-existing documentation, and oral and written interviews with the founders of Macau's sole incense manufacturer, Veng Lei Laboratory (永利紙料), I will demonstrate the government's scramble to compile an inventory of elements that lack depth and representation and the absence of communal involvement in the course of selection and inventory. Contrasting the history of the joss-stick industry with the official discourse, this study argues that the heritagisation of craftsmanship flattens the dynamics of the past experiences of practitioners and further muffles their voices. Providing an intervention to heritage studies from the historical perspective, it encourages a more careful consideration of the necessity of heritagising elements before they are inventoried.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage; authorised heritage discourse; incense craftsmanship; heritage inventory; urban Macau

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1. Introduction

In 2017, four years after the ratification of Macau's Cultural Heritage Protection, the Cultural Affairs Bureau (Instituto Cultural; IC) launched the city's pioneering intangible cultural heritage (ICH) inventory of fifteen items. By 2020, the inventory had grown to seventy entries under four main categories: art expressions and items of a performing nature, social practice, religious practice, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practice regarding nature and the universe, and conventional skills and techniques of traditional handicrafts. Centring on the art of incense/joss-stick making, this study aims to facilitate dialogue in reassessing the process and impact of inventory-making on the construction of 'heritage' under the framework of ICH. It raises questions on the inclusion of a skill obsolete in Macau and subsequently explores how the official discourse not only deprives practitioners of "a sense of identity and continuity" as emphasised by UNESCO, but also muffles the voices of concerned individuals and communities [1]. Exploring the impacts of inventory, I will argue that the narrative provided by the Macau government not only flattens the dynamic past of cultural bearers, but also fails to elucidate both the 'tangible' and 'intangible' significance of the skills to the past, present, and future of the city, thus creating an obstacle to their eventual entrance into global recognition processes. This study uses a historical lens to shed light on the consequential homogenising and blurring of communal voices in the early reconstruction of labour skills as 'heritage'. It calls for a stronger regulation of ICH inventories and a more careful mapping of historical narratives to ensure inventoried items have been interpreted in a manner that, in addition to maintaining sufficient flexibility for future conservation, establishes an empathetic relationship between decision-makers in the present and practitioners in the past.

The idea of tangible heritage has seen considerable evolution, interpretation, and exploration throughout the long history of object- and site-driven conservation. UNESCO's grounding of intangible cultural heritage as an independent category of heritage in 2003 saw a shift of focus to intangible properties, cultural values, and the involvement of local communities as "the bearers of a collective and active memory" [2]. While the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (CSICH) opened new points of access for indigenous peoples and local communities to participate in creating and protecting heritage, there have been concerns over the extent of their involvement vis-à-vis official mechanisms [3,4]. The construction of the so-called 'authorised heritage discourse' (AHD) has, for instance, led to the hegemony of official narratives and consequently, the marginalisation of alternative discourses that contain voices from cultural custodians or community members [5,6]. Lixinski has criticised the convention for offering governments the power to determine which 'traditions' ought to be inventoried and safeguarded [7,8]. Similar observations regarding the overshadowing of official control on communal participation have been extended to different stages of ICH protection. The nomination process, for instance, can also be exclusive: Aykan revealed through the Alevi Semah Ceremony how Turkey's nomination process tended to be politicised and far from inclusive [9]. The same can be said of the Kalbeliya dance, which Ranwa found to be maneuvered by the Indian government from nomination to its safeguarding [10]. In China's case, Maags and Holbig argued that the implementation of the convention fostered an elite-driven system controlled by government-scholar networks [11]. Eichler, in highlighting the pressure for cultural bearers to adapt, submit, and homogenise to official strategies in tourism and commodification, raised the crucial question of "who decides on heritage?" [12]. In addition to government authorities, new social institutions that form a network between associations, clubs, committees, scholars, etc., have risen to shoulder the task of constructing 'heritage' and safeguarding chosen elements, sometimes in ways incompatible with indigenous methods of conservation [13,14]. As will be discussed, sans communal voices, the inventory of joss-stick manufacturing in Macau reveals a local process of heritage selection and creation that oversimplifies complex and overlapping levels of knowledge and ownership. These concerns are not often accentuated in the stage of nomination and inventory.

Constructed, defined, negotiated, curated, and managed by human communities at different levels, all heritage is intangible and hence, underpinned by community values that exceed the material sphere [5] (p. 3), [15]. However, the heritagisation of traditional practices has resulted in consequences that include the softening and sometimes, erasure of the 'intangible' in a rush to safeguard what is 'tangible' through lists, festivals, workshops, competitions, or other expressive means [5] (p. 56), [16]. Building on Gilman's discovery that local Malawi practitioners of the Vimbuza healing ceremony did not consider the tradition a 'heritage', Hafstein deemed its recognition as a dance and an expression of cultural identity divorced from its ritual setting, and thus, unnecessary [17], [13] (pp. 130–131). In other cases such as that of the inventoried Moriones festival of the Philippines, a closer look at its developments reveals the 'festival' as a contemporary reinvention of a religious practice, created to legitimise a political regime in the 1970s. This has led to the depletion of shared 'intangible' values and subsequently, the increasing detachment of locals from their own tradition [18,19]. Byrne, critiquing the tendency of heritage discourse to reduce culture to 'things', called for stronger recognition of 'the intangible'. He proposed for archaeologists and heritage practitioners to reconnect emotionally to history in order to construct a more "empathetic inter-human relationship between the collector in the present and the person in the past" [16] (pp. 248+250). Juxtaposing narratives recovered through historical sources with the IC's official discourse, this study will shed light on a 'disconnection' between the authorised parties in the present and concerned communities in the past. This has pushed the visibility and experiences of cultural bearers to the fringes, which, in the long run, could impact the ways they and the Macau community perceive the tradition of incense making and its relationship to their culture and identity.

While there is a strand of literature on the positive impacts of heritagisation in the Asian context [20–22], critics have nonetheless expressed concerns towards the management of ICH, particularly in empowering state actors and crippling local participation. Focusing on the case of the Malay dance drama mak yong, Hardwick discussed the difficulties traditional stakeholders face as they are caught in contemporary political contention between Malaysian ethnic nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists [23]. You criticised the labelling of superstitious practices in China as ICH for creating unprecedented power relations that have benefitted local officials and scholars yet situated local communities at the bottom of the hierarchy [24]. Chan revealed the highly politicised process that turned the Chaozhou Hungry Ghost Festival of Hong Kong, which she argued was culturally inadequate for authorisation as a national ICH, from a local practice into a national heritage [25]. Mapping the Chinese state's initiative to safeguard ICH in the aftermath of the devastating Wenchuan earthquake, Zhang critiqued heritage regimes for "legitimis[ing] a particular articulation of the ownership and objectification of a culture and its past" [26]. On the Thai government's listing of ethnic Khmer folk music genre kantruem, Denes argued that this move re-inscribed political boundaries and fuelled local anxieties about the ownership of the tradition [27]. These works affirm the realities that ICH safeguarding has paved an alternative arena for heritage regimes to turn local traditions into state property and strengthen government control over the creation of discourses old and new. This has resulted in the construction of narratives that fail to acknowledge the dynamic social meanings behind cultural practices and are neglectful of the blood, sweat, and tears of cultural bearers. The processes of nomination, inventory, and preservation of ICH should, hence, not be taken with a grain of salt. Tackling the dangers of heritagisation on traditions and local communities, Evans and Rowlands proposed conceptualising locality as a multilayered site of "grassroots practices and passions" to ask what matters to people and whether traditions were "worth preserving and changing" from their views [28]. Denes raised the importance of exploring heritagised traditions beyond the folklorised forms of state sponsorship to include the embodied memories and spiritual values that practitioners experience [27] (pp. 22–24). Kuhn and Liu called for a stronger recognition of ICH as an uninterrupted and continuous part of the living traditions of concerned communities [20]. Supporting the idea that the complex voices, memories, and emotions of local communities should be made crucial in ICH preservation, I use the case of Macau to demonstrate how heritagisation can disregard the lived experiences of locals when dominated by heritage regimes.

Contributing to existing dialogue on issues surrounding the institutionalisation of ICH safeguarding and the consequential devitalisation of intangible values, the case of Macau's joss-stick manufacturing will demonstrate not only the government's scramble to compile an inventory of elements that lack depth and representation, but also the devaluation of historical traditions and cultural meaning in the process of heritagisation. Notably, joss-stick making, in the recognised skills of cuoxiang 搓香 (kneading) and linxiang 淋香 (coating), had disappeared from Macau's industrial landscape for at least three decades by the time it was added to the official inventory in 2020. Contrasting the history of the joss-stick industry with the official discourse, I will argue that the heritagisation of craftsmanship, particularly those that have become obsolete, flattens the dynamics of the past experiences of practitioners and deprecates the cultural significance of traditional skills. Providing an intervention to heritage studies from the historical perspective, this study encourages a more careful consideration of the necessity of heritagising elements before they are inventoried.

2. Material and Methods

Deploying a historical approach, this study analyses official documents, old English- and Chinese-language newspapers printed between the 1940s and 1980s, pre-existing documentation, and oral and written interviews with the founders of Veng Lei Laboratory (永利紙料), Keng Si Wong and Kim Chen. While the official documents reveal the government's general approach to ICH management and the IC's over-simplified interpretation

of joss-stick making as heritage, it is through the newspapers that I re-located the dynamics of the industry and rebuilt the experiences of practitioners. The slender information I gathered from my interviews with Wong and Chen will be complemented with other cultural representations of incense makers to show the possibilities of constructing alternative narratives that can better represent local experiences and values. Wong's grandfather ran Papelaria Veng Lei for forty-three years until 1985 and Veng Lei Laboratory is a recent revival and reinvention of the family business. Although Veng Lei manufactures incense using a method not listed in the inventory, it stands as the city's sole incense maker as of 2023. With no cultural bearer officially identified, Veng Lei has been actively promoting joss-stick craftsmanship as heritage through public presentations and workshops in schools, nursing homes, and other communal settings [29]. The memories of Wong as a Macau resident, together with Chen's entrepreneurial vision of preserving the dwindling local tradition of incense use in everyday life, will offer us some insights on the 'intangible' dimensions of joss-stick making absent from the official narrative. I would like to note that the aim here is not to affirm Wong and Chen's interpretation, which remains fragile without more data, as inclusive and representational. Rather, this study aims to emphasise that the past and the present are equally important in constructing 'heritage'. Heritage means nothing without shared values but it also cannot be sustained without contemporary engagement. The control heritage regimes have over the process of heritagisation has led to various scenarios where the past, together with the intangible values traditions represent, are often eschewed. This study thus proposes construing historical sources to form more complete historical accounts in the early stages of selection and inventory: history could serve as a guidepost for governments, heritage experts, and local participants in pinning down values that speak to designated communities and societies. It could also help counter AHD by flagging discourses that drift from detected meanings to function for political motives.

By conflating the aforementioned sources, this study restores the experiences of practitioners and provides a more thorough picture of Macau's joss-stick industry with the aim of revealing the damages unregulated heritagisation can bring to the documentation and remembrance of history, as well as to the future of ICH preservation. The results of the analysis will be structured in the next section as such: I will first tackle issues in the early process of heritagisation in Macau and then restore the missing local experiences to demonstrate the potential condensation of history and lived experiences in the process of 'heritage' making. This will be followed by a critical discussion of Macau's path to ICH safeguarding, which I will argue is formed on the problematic foundations of an inventory that consists of elements included for the sake of making a lengthy list. Finally, reflections will be provided on how historians and historical approaches can contribute to a more effective selection and inventory of expressions.

3. Results

3.1. The Feeble Official Discourse

The Macau government first recognised the importance of safeguarding ICH through the 2014 Cultural Heritage Protection Law (Lei n.° 11/2013). Article 71 of the law stressed the aim of safeguarding ICH to guarantee the continuity and authenticity of manifestations. It pledged to respect the authenticity and integrity of traditions and prevent the distortion or depreciation of their presentation and transmission. To achieve these aims, the government appointed the Cultural Affairs Bureau/IC as the main body responsible for the inventory of elements, promotional work in the identification, documentation, investigation and study of selected manifestations, and the initiation of communal participation across various stages of ICH safeguarding. Inventory, either proposed by the IC or nominated by the public, is based on six criteria laid out in Article 74:

1. the importance of elements to communities or groups;
2. their social and cultural contexts, and their historical and spatial representativeness;
3. their effective production or reproduction within designated communities or groups;

4. the practicality of their transmission and methods in transmission;
5. the potential risks of extinction, partial or total, they face;
6. sustainable development fulfilling mutual respect between communities, groups, and individuals.

These points echo the guiding principles on inventory provided under the CSICH, which suggest the following information to be provided in official descriptions: the name of the element; identified community(ies), groups, or individuals; the present-day function and value for the community(ies) concerned; their state of viability and/or threats and risks to viability; and information on the collection and processing of the entry and how this was conducted with the participation and consent of the identified community(ies) [30].

The making of incense sticks was inventoried in 2020 under the category of 'conventional skills and techniques of traditional handicraft'. The official narrative provides a brief description of the cultural and economic significance of joss sticks to the city, rooted in the use of incense in religious ceremonies, and the prosperity of the joss-stick industry, which relied mainly on the manufacturing processes of cuoxiang and linxiang. Both processes were labour-intensive: the former requires combining sawdust, spices, and incense powder to create a mixture that is kneaded, heated, and then rolled one by one into thin bamboo sticks until they are fully coated. Finally, the coated incense sticks are left to dry in open air. Linxiang is carried out by soaking a bundle of bamboo sticks in water and dipping this in a mixture three times before they are left to dry. The IC explains that the joss-stick industry was one of Macau's three largest manufacturing industries at its peak between the 1950s and 1970s when there were more than forty factories; it has, however, declined with "the opening of the Chinese mainland market and due to a lack of space and a limited local workforce", leaving "only a few craftsmen today who are still dedicated to this handicraft". Notably, the official discourse provides an ambiguous twofold narrative of the heritage value of incense making, quoting:

The manufacture of incense sticks involves complex processes and sophisticated techniques, which is representative of [sic] the resilience of this traditional Chinese handicraft culture in Macao. The prosperity of the local incense industry was directly connected with the traditional customs and religious beliefs of local communities. As such, this craft is also of significant value for the study of past economic development of Macao, as well as the daily lives, traditions and culture of local residents [31].

This narrative suffices neither the standards outlined in the Cultural Heritage Protection Law nor the loose guidelines of the CSICH regarding inventory. Although the CSICH flexibly encourages the inclusion of as many manifestations as probable, it has placed much emphasis on community participation in the process of inventory. Except for demonstration photographs of Kin Hong Tam, the current owner of Veng Heng Cheong Joss-stick Shop (榮馨祥香莊), the IC has not explicitly identified a community or practitioner. Tam's name or his role (if any) in the creation and processing of the entry was not addressed. Due to the fact that he runs the city's oldest incense shop, local media has generally referred to Tam as a surviving example [31–33]. Notably, Veng Heng Cheong is a family-ran business that started in 1968 but Tam has stopped local manufacturing over the last three decades or so, instead packaging and selling incense produced by a factory in San Wui, Guangdong, that he shares with some Hong Kong investors [34]. The termination of incense production in Macau is owing to a number of reasons. For one, labour supply has declined, with the younger generation unwilling to enter a bleak industry that requires heavy physical work. Secondly, the decreasing demand for sacrificial joss sticks, marked by disinterest from the younger generation to continue the everyday ritual of praying for blessings, has also made it a challenge to run the business. Macau's land use has also widely shifted since the 1980s: entrepreneurs either sold off their factories or relocated to mainland China, squeezing remaining shops into scales and sizes that could no longer support the manufacturing of incense [35]. Tam has thought of closing down his shop a couple of times but decided to continue so he could keep himself occupied [36].

To date, only one media report has linked Veng Lei Laboratory to efforts in promoting incense making as an ICH through modernisation [37]. Despite having learned the traditional craftsmanship of cuoxiang and linxiang, Wong has been making fragrant incense using the method of hexiang 合香 (fragrance combining), which is carried out by first mixing herbs and flowers with sticky powder taken from trees, and then adding water to form dough. Thin bamboo sticks are used to roll the dough into joss sticks of various scents for leisure use. While the basic skills required are similar to the crafting of sacrificial joss sticks, Veng Lei manufactures incense sticks that have a strong emphasis on relaxing aromatherapy. In my conversation with Wong and Chen, the young entrepreneurs have admitted the impracticability of reviving the traditional skills of cuoxiang and linxiang. Instead, they saw a greater possibility of reviving the ritual of burning incense as a part of everyday life by rebranding the purpose of joss sticks from sacrificial to comfort [30,38]. They also expressed it would be difficult for the Macau authorities to name them as existing practitioners and cultural bearers of joss-stick craftsmanship [30]. This is perhaps due to the fact that their business only started in 2021, their deviation from traditional methods, or their innovative vision of modernising the making and use of incense in a transforming society, all of which do not fit in the official narrative the IC provides.

Marked by the idea of a "sense of identity and continuity", the main aim of ICH has been to safeguard culture by creating opportunities wherein people can enjoy the conditions to produce and re-create culture that means something to them [39,40]. With no local practitioners still using the methods heritagised for economic subsistence, what could be the importance of cuoxiang and linxiang to communities, groups, or individuals? Production and transmission have become impractical in the face of Macau's changing economic and cultural silhouette, which no longer relies on industrial manufacturing and has increasingly depended on gambling since the turn of the century. Having faded from the heart of the city's economy for over three decades and disentangled from the city's twenty-first-century developments, the art of incense making cannot be considered an 'at risk' practice awaiting protection as articulated by the Macau Cultural Heritage Protection Law and the CSICH. In addition to its failure to explain the current and future circumstances of joss-stick making, the IC's official description has also failed to address the 'intangible' significance of the craft to practitioners and the city, referring only to the industry as one in Macau's "three principal manufacturing industries [in the post-war era], together with the match and firecracker industries" [32]. As I will demonstrate in the next section, a closer exploration of the history of joss-stick making reveals how official discourses can problematically provide misinformation, trample communal voices, and diminish the existence of communal spirit that could potentially give meaning to heritagised elements.

3.2. Building Discourses through the Dynamic Past

Macau's joss-stick industry emerged in the nineteenth century and expanded in the twentieth century owing to changes across the Asian region [35] (pp. 12–24). The industry exploded in the post-war period, facilitated by a transforming China and the outbreak of the Cold War. These developments saw a decline in China's previous market dominance, which would be complemented by the banning of incense production and usage during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Thanks to the availability of open spaces, cheap rent, and inexpensive labour, Macau became a new centre for joss-stick manufacturing, providing locally and exporting to the United States and Southeast Asia. A local shop named Leung Wing Hing 梁永馨, for instance, exported 900 boxes of joss sticks worth MOP 100,000 to Southeast Asia in the year 1951 [41]. Despite this, the industry could barely be considered a pillar industry of post-war Macau: records from 1958 show it made up 4.7% of Macau's exports, only slightly higher than matches (3.8%) and below food (9.9%), textiles (19%), firecrackers (20%), and fish (32.8%); by the late 1960s, joss sticks would fade from significance, with matches remaining important at 7.1%, fish at 9.2%, and textiles and garments taking over at 71.8% [42]. In line with the economic reforms in China and Macau's broader social, cultural, and economic shifts to reliance on gambling and tourism, joss-stick man-

ufacturing faded out during the late 1980s. In 1987, the city saw only eight to ten skilled crafters left with no successors in sight [43–45]. Soon thereafter, local production of joss sticks came to a halt [46,47].

The experiences of entrepreneurs and workers, nonetheless, provide a reflection of Macau's resilience in the face of tougher times. Behind the city's successful industrial development were various setbacks caused by global and regional developments. A US-led trade embargo on Macau during the Korean War, military conflicts in Vietnam, import restrictions from Singapore, and heavy duties imposed by the Thai government prompted shop owners to look for alternative paths [48]. To avoid these, they eventually rerouted exports to the United States and Southeast Asia through British Hong Kong [49]. This would be followed by the skyrocketing of the price of raw material from China and the stiffening of competition from new incense manufacturers that sprouted across Southeast Asia in the 1950s [50–53]. Production would decline in the mid-1960s but picked up again in the mid-1970s with over forty factories, the majority operated by Hong Kong investors [54,55]. To overcome these hurdles, joss-stick entrepreneurs worked together to establish a union. As early as 1898, the Tong Yi Tang 同益堂 was founded by eighteen shop owners to create standard industry rules. These ranged from setting an average price for incense sticks in correspondence to their size and standardising an average workers' salary to regulate competition and prevent disputes. Furthermore, entrepreneurs agreed to follow a unified apprenticeship system wherein shops would refrain from employing workers who tried to run off from their three-year apprenticeship with other firms [35] (pp. 55–57). It is unclear when this organisation folded but records from the 1950s show joss-stick entrepreneurs using the Macao Chamber of Commerce as a platform to voice their opinions [56].

Throughout the period that the official narrative marks as the peak of the joss-stick industry, practitioners faced unstable employment and low salaries, the latter usually determined by the number of joss sticks produced each day under harsh working conditions. Production fluctuated with the rise and decline of the industry and difficult times saw the emergence of unemployment and/or pay cuts. Connected by shared grievances, workers had their own forms of solidarity. In 1947, for instance, a salary reduction of 25% resulted in a strike organised by female practitioners of cuoxiang. This was a time when workers earned MOP 0.20 for every 10,000 joss sticks made [57]. The early 1960s saw over forty-eight linxiang workers go on strike to demand a pay raise [58]. A sense of solidarity could be marginally observed from the small communal networks that workers established in the workplace. Many joss-stick makers lived in factories where food and lodging was provided. They observed similar cultural practices linked to the industry: on the twenty-second of August of the lunar calendar, they collectively paid respects to the Dipankara Buddha (Buddha of Fixed Light; Randeng Fo 燃燈佛), who is worshipped as the forefather of incense industries [59]. This was organised in different scales by factory owners and was often followed by a banquet to thank the employees for their hard work [60].

For the residents of Macau, the joss-stick industry could only symbolise an era long past its heyday. Fluctuations aside, the consistent manufacturing of joss sticks until the late 1980s/early 1990s helped embed incense making into the economic and cultural landscape of Macau. As Keng Si Wong expressed in our conversation, joss-stick making represents a shared memory amongst Chinese locals and could thus feed into the collective identity of the Macau people. From the 1940s to the 1980s, many residents learned how to make incense, knew someone in the joss-stick industry, or used incense as part of a ritual of daily worship. Even in present-day Macau, incense sticks are found in random street corners where statues of Gods, some of which were abandoned, stand (Figure 1). Incense, thus, intertwined the experiences of Macau residents from all walks of life. Having grown up in a family of incense makers, he pointed out that at a personal level, the meaning of the craft lay in the collective desire to find happiness amidst the hardship of making and selling incense [38]. Wong's narrative of joss sticks as a part of everyday life for Macau people is confirmed by the representations of joss-stick practitioners, particularly female, in printed works. The term cuoxiang nu 搓香女 (female incense kneaders) appeared in news-

paper reports and short stories that featured the lives of women practitioners. One vividly described a cuoxiang nu with a head wrap coloured by incense dust and an apron with patches of black, white, and yellow stains [61]. This very picture was provided in another editorial contribution from a local citizen where he or she mentioned seeing craftswomen working under the sun with head wraps. This writer expressed their sympathy to the female practitioners, stressing the effort they put in to earn ample money for the day's survival [62]. As far as in 2007, a Taiwanese newspaper featured a painting from Macau artist Chan Wai Fai 陳偉輝 of a female incense maker wearing a head wrap as a symbol of old Macau. The short article was entitled 'Ambience of Bygone Days, Macau Street' (*siri fengqing Aomen jie* 昔日風情 澳門街) [63]. Notably, the focus on female workers was based on the fact that cuoxiang was a female-dominated industry. In the 1920s, 55% of incense makers in Macau were women. The 1930s saw 790 women and 220 men [64]. By the 1940s, cuoxiang would become the predominant approach to incense manufacturing as linxiang, which was practiced mostly by male workers, was less compatible with the city's humid climate [35] (pp. 55–57). From this perspective, female practitioners played a significant role in the sustenance and development of joss-stick crafting in Macau; yet, they have been left out of the IC's official description.

Figure 1. Joss sticks presented at a shrine located at the back of a temple in Coloane, Macau, in 2018. Photograph contributed by José Luís de Sales Marques.

The official heritage discourse of Macau's incense is problematic in multilayered ways: it provides an oversimplified history that ignores the ebbs and flows of the joss-sticking industry and silences the struggles and voices of female workers and other practitioners. Significantly, the IC has failed to identify what the skill means to practitioners and the city with regards to their "social and cultural contexts" and "historical and spatial representativeness" as stated in the guidelines of the Macau Law on Cultural Heritage Preservation. Without community involvement and identification, the representations of Macau's ICH inventory appear piecemeal and homogenising, further flattening the dynamic experiences of concerned individuals and communities. This leads to the question: for whom are ICH inventories made? In Macau, the construction of an ambiguous discourse and the communal absence and/or lack of equal access to spaces of interpretation and negotiation suggest the ICH project has, to a certain extent, served the interests of the Macau authorities. In

the next section, I will discuss the potential damages unregulated heritagisation can bring to the documentation and remembrance of history, and to the future of ICH preservation. This study will then conclude with some reflections on how historical approaches can help in the identification and safeguarding of ICH.

4. Discussion: To Heritagise or Not to Heritagise?

The CSICH states one of the chief purposes of safeguarding heritage as the protection of cultural diversity in the face of globalisation. The listing of items in inventories is seen as a first step in allowing neglected communities to gain wider recognition and demonstrate pride in local identity [65,66]. At its present state, the official narrative of incense making says little about how it represents practitioners and the city of Macau. The need for a more explicit description is especially evident when we consider how incense manufacturing has been heritagised in other places. In Singapore, the government has identified the Tay Guan Heng shop, a family business that started in the 1930s, as a cultural bearer for their specialty in making giant joss sticks. The official narrative traces the rituals of Chinese migrants and highlights the reinvention of Tay Guan Heng in attempts to catch up with Singapore's shifting religious terrain. The art of making customised incense figures from metal wires, newspapers, and joss stick dough, for instance, has become a new attraction that has helped set Singapore's incense-making craftsmanship apart from that in China. Albert Tay, the fourth-generation heir, has been actively promoting this unique 'Singaporean' craft by speaking to local and foreign media, and participating in local workshops and foreign exhibitions [67]. In China's Yongchun county, southeast of Fujian, Pu Lianggong has been marked as the inheritor of a complex Arab incense-making craft that uses natural spices and Chinese herbs, and requires ten procedures to complete. With over twenty practitioners left, the Chinese government has included the Yongchun incense craft on its list as a national ICH and linked its significance to Fujian's historical connections to the Silk Road [68]. On the surface, both cases clearly demonstrate the involvement of cultural bearers and the identification of the historical, economic, and cultural significances of incense making to practitioners, their cities, and states.

In contrast to these two examples, the heritagisation of incense making in Macau reveals the construction of a weak official discourse that barely involves cultural practitioners and fails to explain how it works as, quoting UNESCO, "touchstones", "points of reference", and "identity" [69]. The fact that incense factories had disappeared from the city for three decades should also raise questions on whether the craft is still a suitable element for inventory and, eventually, safeguarding. As of 2023, IC has created two inventory lists of seventy items containing a number of elements that are collectively observed and/or practiced by Chinese communities in various parts of the world. These include but are not limited to the dragon boat festival, dragon boat racing, mid-autumn festival, winter solstice festivities, the making of traditional Chinese sauces, and the confection of preserved fruits. Similar to the ambiguous official narrative provided for incense manufacturing, IC has used broad strokes in explaining these elements as traditions that have existed for a long time in Macau. No references have been made to communities or individuals, and the existing circumstances of preservation have not been explicitly addressed. Of manifestations linked to Macau's Portuguese past, the manufacture and painting of azulejos was inventoried for being "a traditional craft of Portuguese arts and culture that was also transmitted in Macao" and a "representative of the harmonious co-existence of Chinese and Portuguese cultures" in the city [70]. The incorporation of trans-border elements sans narratives that exhibit their past, present, and future significance to the people of Macau echoes Hafstein's worry from over a decade ago that the ICH fervour would lead to the creation of "a shopping list for treasure hunters" and "a free catalogue" for those looking to appropriate cultural elements [71].

In view of UNESCO's flexible guidelines and the overshadowing of academic preoccupation with issues encompassing the process of negotiating, safeguarding, and preserving heritage, literature on ICH inventory has remained slender. This study has shed light on

the importance of the process of inventory, particularly because it identifies and consolidates groundwork information crucial to the subsequent selection and safeguarding of heritage. Through the case of Macau, it has revealed the dangers of authorised heritage discourses, created in the early process of inventory, in dimming the dynamic experiences of cultural practitioners and in neglecting the spirit and intangible values that traditional skills create for individuals and communities. While scholars and experts have identified, in the vein of AHD, cases wherein traditions were politicised or intangible values were dismissed, this study has demonstrated how the early stages of heritagisation can lead to the flattening of real-life dynamics as experienced by people in the past. Through repeated media exposure, simplified official narratives can eventually homogenise communal complexities, dull the vibrancy of historical developments, and erase the human touch in tangible references. As Konagaya pointed out, the deployment of heritage as an instrument of governance can profoundly impact 'the way people perceive and experience their culture, identity, and history' [72]. At the end of the day, we need to acknowledge that ICH inventories are not just compilations of traditional elements. Rather, they form powerful narratives that can influence how the future will remember the past.

Finally, this study in no way suggests that the craft of incense making is not worthy of being considered an ICH of Macau. Alternately, it is an exhibition of the 'disconnection' between the authorised parties in the present and the concerned communities in the past, leading to the absence of a shared value necessary to justify heritagisation. This is, however, not only an issue that Macau faces in the journey to heritage management. As Spennemann pointed out, values can differ in nature and strength between different segments of a community. They are mutable not only intergenerationally but also within a person's life span, making it incongruous with the static nature of heritage [73]. Echoing this observation from a historians' point of view, the fact that history is not linear presents challenges in defining values and, subsequently, in constructing a heritage discourse that speaks for all cultural bearers past and present. Acknowledgment of this problem, nonetheless, should prompt governments and local communities to work closely together to decide whether an element is worth heritagising. An exploration of the epistemology of nominations and valuations, for instance, could help in assessing whether heritage-listed properties are "reflective of the cultural, social, and economic realities of a community as seen through their historic trajectories" [74].

As an alternative, this study proposes the use of historical approaches not only in guiding heritage practitioners and cultural bearers in the selection and construction of official narratives, but also in forging an empathetic relationship between governments and cultural practitioners as they collectively look ahead to the future. Heritage studies has not seen a broad intervention from the area of history; however, a clearer and unbiased understanding of the past can be useful in determining whether an element is fitting for preservation and how governments can tie the fabric of the past, present, and future of traditions, practitioners, and cities/states. In the case study I used, the history of incense manufacturing suggests its significance as a marker of the collective striving of workers, particularly of women, in the post-war era. Its withdrawal from the urban silhouette of Macau, however, should prompt questions on whether the skill should have been inventoried at all, considering it no longer plays a role in present-day Macau. The same goes with selected expressions that can be found in places outside of Macau—their unique representations of Macau people's history, identity, and culture need to be addressed to justify their inventory. In order to effectively construct heritage according to UNESCO's definition of "our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to the future generations", the past should not be overlooked in the early stages of heritagisation [75]. Reiterating Lowenthal's reflection of the past as simultaneously essential to making sense of the present and a burden that cripples innovation, I end with the question: how much of the past should be kept to ensure ample spaces for dynamic reinvention [76,77]? Exploring this in future studies should help in writing official heritage narratives that show a stronger awareness to historical accuracy, social harmony, and greater inclusivity.

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