

Anthropology in Hong Kong According to the GSAP: A Celebration of Public Outreach

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Abstract

This paper examines what the Global Survey of Anthropological Practice reveals about anthropology as practiced in Hong Kong, and notes that the statistical data offered by Hong Kong Anthropological Association members does not reflect professional anthropology in the city. This is because the Hong Kong Anthropological Society is a non-professional association dedicated to bringing anthropological knowledge to a larger public, with an astonishing diversity of members from all walks of life. The paper suggests that this motley society, in its implicit repudiation of anthropological professionalism, may offer a modest lesson in how, even in a society in which the number of anthropologists is too tiny to create a viable professional organization, bringing anthropology to the public may nonetheless be eminently achievable.

Keywords: Global Survey of Anthropological Practice, Hong Kong Anthropological Society, public outreach, Hong Kong, anthropological professionalism.

Antropologia em Hong Kong de acordo com o GSAP: Uma celebração de atuação pública

Resumo

Este artigo examina o que a *Pesquisa Global de Práticas Antropológicas* revela sobre a antropologia praticada em Hong Kong e observa que os dados estatísticos oferecidos pelos membros da Associação Antropológica de Hong Kong não refletem a antropologia profissional na cidade. Isso ocorre porque a Sociedade Antropológica de Hong Kong é uma associação não profissional dedicada a levar o conhecimento antropológico a um público maior, com uma diversidade surpreendente de membros de todas as esferas da vida. O artigo sugere que essa sociedade heterogênea, em seu repúdio implícito ao profissionalismo antropológico, pode oferecer uma modesta lição de como, mesmo em uma sociedade em que o número de antropólogos é muito pequeno para criar uma organização profissional viável, trazer a antropologia ao público pode no entanto, ser absolutamente alcançável.

Palavras-chave: Pesquisa Global de Práticas Antropológicas, Sociedade Antropológica de Hong Kong, atuação pública, Hong Kong, profissionalismo antropológico.

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The GSAP and Hong Kong

The Global Survey of Anthropological Practice has provided some fascinating data concerning anthropology in Hong Kong. There were 49 members of the Hong Kong Anthropological Society who took the survey, of remarkably diverse national origins. Respondents were born in 15 different societies in all, with 16 born in Hong Kong, and 4 in mainland China, but also 10 born in the US, 3 in the UK, 2 in Canada, 2 in Pakistan, and 2 in the Philippines; Brazil, Germany, and Japan were also represented, as were Taiwan, Albania, Australia, Spain, and Ireland. The countries in which respondents obtained their anthropological education, whether undergraduate or graduate, were also diverse: 10 in all, including not just Hong Kong (13 respondents) or the US (9 respondents), the UK (5 respondents), or mainland China (3 respondents) but also Switzerland, Taiwan, Italy, France, Ireland, and Spain. Only 21 respondents, well under half, were employed by universities, with many of the remainder working for international NGOs, consultancy companies, research institutes, government agencies, or were self-employed. Since in Hong Kong all research graduate students receive a salary from universities, this indicates a separation from universities by the majority of respondents. Probing further, the survey reveals that of 49 respondents to the survey, only 36 have degrees in anthropology at either graduate or undergraduate level; 11 say that they have no training in anthropology at any level and are thus anthropologists not in terms of objective qualifications but in terms of their own self-identification.

When I examine the GSAP survey results for Hong Kong, I cannot square the data with my own knowledge of anthropology as practiced in universities in Hong Kong. Until recently I have been chair of the only anthropology department in Hong Kong, with twelve members. There are also anthropologists working in other departments in most of Hong Kong's eight publicly-funded universities: some 25 university-based anthropologists in all. If I were to catalogue the situation of academic anthropologists in Hong Kong, I would provide a picture of precarious but comparatively well-paid employment under a Hong-Kong-wide university system that is extraordinarily competitive and always desperately trying to rise in university rankings—something at which the system is relatively successful, but at considerable human cost (see Bosco, 2017). I would also mention the National Security Law, implemented in 2020, which makes it potentially dangerous for anthropology teachers in Hong Kong to criticize the Chinese Communist Party, although we have not yet seen any anthropology teacher prosecuted for this. If I were also cataloguing the situation of anthropology graduate-degree holders who work for museums, as consultants, in NGOs, or as archaeologists in the commercial sector, I would add to the above portrayal a picture of anthropologists struggling to maintain their professional identities in a bureaucratic Hong Kong world that may have very different aims from theirs, to their frustration. With the GSAP data, however, I cannot fully make these analyses, for the people answering the survey seem widely variegated, united only by their self-definition as anthropologists.

I don't think that this makes the data from the GSAP survey invalid, however; the data of the survey seem accurate as a reflection of the Hong Kong Anthropological Society's members. The clearest way to understand the unusual GSAP data is to understand the unusual nature of the Hong Kong Anthropological Society.

The Hong Kong Anthropological Society

Almost all anthropological associations in the world are made up primarily of professional anthropologists and their students: they are professional organizations.

The Hong Kong Anthropological Society is unusual among anthropological societies in the WCAA and in the world, in that it is not a professional organization but is designed to bring anthropological knowledge to a larger audience. The society has no dues or formal membership but rather an e-mail list of some 540, made up of anyone who wants to be on the list; monthly talks at the Hong Kong Museum of History, generally by university-based anthropologists from around the world, bring in audiences ranging from 30 to 140. Among the people who attend these talks (with whom one may become acquainted in large part through a self-paying dinner after the talks that all attendees at the talks are invited to, at least up until the emergence of covid-19), some are academic anthropologists and their students; some are anthropological degree holders at some level who work in Hong Kong government-funded-museums, or in NGOs, consultancies, or marketing; and many are people from all walks of life, including teachers, newspaper reporters, freelancers of all different sorts, lawyers, and civil servants, who have been consistently coming to talks of the Hong Kong Anthropological Society for years, and because of this, may identify themselves as anthropologists in the GSAP Survey. The majority of the attendees at talks are typically of Chinese ethnicity but are highly fluent in English. The Society has sometimes had talks in Cantonese, the native language of most Hong Kong residents. However, it has generally focused on English as the language of its lectures, emphasizing a diverse audience at the expense of not having many attendees from among less-educated Hongkongers who may speak little English. The diversity of respondents so apparent in the survey data, as well as the comparative under-representation of Hong Kong Chinese in the data, no doubt reflects this linguistic choice.

The Hong Kong Anthropological Society has evolved into this structure partly because of demographics. With the slowly growing number of academic anthropologists in Hong Kong over the years and their graduate students, there are simply not enough academic anthropologists to create the trappings of a professional organization. Well-attended monthly talks or conferences could not take place with this limited number of potential professional participants; in this environment, an anthropological society could survive only through public outreach. Indeed, from the founding of the Hong Kong Anthropological Society in 1978, the aim has been to present anthropology to a larger public. Hong Kong is a particularly suitable place to do this, because there is a large lay population of people, both locals and foreigners, who are well-educated and interested in a wide array of topics, including anthropological topics. For the past forty years, this is what the Hong Kong Anthropological Society has done, with a range of monthly speakers, from well-known luminaries in the field, such as Sidney Mintz, Ulf Hannerz, Danilyn Rutherford, and Michael Herzfeld, to graduate students presenting their ethnographic findings. These talks have long been held at the Hong Kong Museum of History free of charge, which has made the Hong Kong Anthropological Society's ongoing existence possible—without the Museum's and the Hong Kong Government's largesse, the Hong Kong Anthropological Society could not have existed. By the same token, there has been a small degree of political self-censorship: I could not invite a friend who is an advocate of Hong Kong localism to give a talk, for example, for fear of alienating the authorities who provide us with a free venue for talks.

The Hong Kong Anthropological Society has changed over the years. In the 1980s and 1990s, it always had an academic, from anthropology or a related field, as chair; it had formal dues and a yearly publication, *The Hong Kong Anthropologist*. In that era, it generally struggled to have a membership of 100 or 120 people. As Hong Kong academia became more and more professionalized in the 1990s and 2000s, the motivation for producing the journal diminished, since academics could gain no credit for publishing a journal for a general audience, and general audiences had little interest in reading academic anthropological publications. Eventually, after various twists and turns, *The Hong Kong Anthropologist* became a student publication,

and, in 2011, dues for the Hong Kong Anthropological Society were abolished, since the organization had no more need for money. Membership became defined simply by being on the e-mail list for notices about monthly talks, a number which swelled to 540, as earlier noted. Average talk attendance also went considerably up—average attendance per monthly talk is now 60, as opposed to some 30 a decade ago. The Society does continue to have an Executive Committee, meeting once every two months, consisting of a president (a layperson), a vice-president, (an academic), and 10-12 members, a mixture of professors, graduate students, and laypeople, whose single responsibility is planning upcoming talks for the Society (and who typically drink a great deal in the course of such planning; this is a social event as much as a professional obligation).

The Hong Kong Anthropological Society brings no professional credit to those involved in it; one earns no brownie points for tenure through involvement in its activities, and one gains little or nothing in credit in one's yearly activity reports for one's university. It seems likely that the only person in the history of the Hong Kong Anthropological Society who has gained professionally from its activities is me. I have been able to sit side by side with presidents of the American and Indian and Japanese Anthropological Associations at the WCAA meetings, getting to know them well, largely because of my presence at Hong Kong Anthropological Society Executive Committee Meetings over the years, who have chosen me as their representative to WCAA; I am now Deputy Chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations, despite the perhaps dubious background of the anthropological society I represent. The members of the Hong Kong Anthropological Society Executive Committee over the years have included such diverse people as a former editor of *Soldier of Fortune* Magazine, a teacher of Latin correcting papal proclamations as reported in the local newspaper, a lawyer for Hong Kong strip joints called whenever a police raid is imminent, a somewhat likely but unproven CIA agent, a possible drug dealer, and a number of professional anthropologists. I have written several articles about world anthropology on the basis of my involvement in the Hong Kong Anthropological Society, but my key sense over the years of my involvement in the Society has not been how it has helped my career, although no doubt it has, but rather how much fun it has been to deal with a such a variety of really, really unusual people.

Implications

The structure of the Hong Kong Anthropological Society, whereby anyone who wants to can join regardless of their background, has led the GSAP Survey to provide a picture of what anthropology is like in Hong Kong that is based on self-ascription rather than professional qualifications as an anthropologist. A question that this profile may suggest is this: Should the Hong Kong Anthropological Society even belong to the WCAA? After all, it now has no formal membership, and professional anthropologists make up only a small fraction of its informal membership. It is apparently not dedicated to increasing anthropological knowledge but rather to popularizing anthropological knowledge. In this sense, it may be unique in the World Council of Anthropological Associations, and perhaps, like a fish among fowl or an apple among oranges, it should not belong. My argument in the brief remainder of this paper is that, rather than expelling the Hong Kong Anthropological Society from its august ranks—which, in all honesty, no one has ever suggested except for me—the WCAA should consider the Hong Kong Anthropological Society as an exemplar and perhaps a harbinger of a flourishing future for the discipline.

Anthropology, reflecting the ongoing professionalization of the academic world in general, has become more professionally defined throughout much of the world, with anthropologists often considered to be only those who make a living from the discipline, and, ideally, those working at universities. Anthropologists employed by universities have in many societies been under increasing pressure to write for one another rather than for any larger public, in peer-reviewed journals and academic presses. Anthropologists in earlier eras, such as Ruth Benedict (1934) and Margaret Mead (1928), indeed wrote for the general public.

Today, because of the professionalization of anthropology, far fewer anthropologists (with the exception of the late David Graeber [2011]) can effectively do this. This turning away from any larger public is regrettable—if, for example, surgeons or engineers do not write intelligibly for a larger public, the public can still benefit from what they have discovered, through the surgeon’s medical operations or the engineer’s building projects. But if anthropologists do not write for a larger audience, then their findings may be buried in professional obscurity, and may never reach any larger public. Today, in an era when anthropologists no longer devote themselves to explications of “culture,” most people have no idea what anthropologists do and what the discipline consists of (see Mathews, 2019). This, I believe, is a global problem for the discipline: if larger publics do not understand what anthropologists do, then why should their tax dollars fund what anthropologists do? Why bother with anthropology?

Anthropology as presented in the Hong Kong Anthropological Society, and as reflected in the GSAP survey, is a repudiation of this stance. The anthropologists who present their findings to the Hong Kong Anthropological Society get little professional credit for it but do indeed serve to bring anthropology to a broader public audience. This has apparently led some non-professional anthropologists who attend these talks to nonetheless identify themselves as anthropologists: this is in effect an affirmation of this larger public anthropology. Of course the Hong Kong Anthropological Society is hardly alone in this endeavor—journals such as *SAPIENS* (2021) are among many such efforts today. But among anthropological societies, the Hong Kong Anthropological Society is perhaps unique in its repudiation of anthropological professionalism.

At a time when professional anthropology’s relevance is increasingly questioned in many parts of the world, I view this as a very positive thing. The survey results I have discussed in this paper are apparently the result of anthropology’s public outreach in Hong Kong through the Hong Kong Anthropological Society. I wonder if the example of Hong Kong might not hold some lessons that other anthropological societies might consider following, in terms of how to interact with and engage a larger public audience, in showing them what anthropology has to offer, and in convincing them that they themselves, in their lay interests, might also be anthropologists. It amazes me to be saying this, but this little pipsqueak anthropological society to which I belong, without even any formal membership, and whose executive meetings are basically no more than an occasion to get drunk, just might be an exemplar to the anthropological world as a whole.

Received: October 19, 2021

Approved: November 26, 2021

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