



The Living Threads of Dragon’s Beard Candy

On a midweek afternoon, a black rainstorm shrouds Hong Kong. Despite the damp, Central Market offers a sharp contrast: shops reopen and crockery clinks back to life after lunchtime. Near the Bamboo Garden kiosk on the first floor, Wong Hon-keung arrives in a white chef’s jacket and jeans. He is the shop’s founder and one of the last guardians of dragon beard candy in the city.

The story of dragon beard candy is often traced back more than a millennium in China, although its precise origins are obscured by legend. It was once known as 銀絲糖 (ngan4 sil tong4), literally “silver-thread candy.” One story holds that an imperial chef made it to impress an emperor with the spectacle of pulling the sugar. Today, versions are found across East and Southeast Asia. Hand-pulled into thousands of delicate strands, the candy is traditionally filled with crushed peanuts, desiccated coconut and sesame seeds. Yet, like many traditional crafts in the city, the technique is disappearing.

“To my knowledge, only one other shop in the city, in Mong Kok, still makes it by hand, and it is run by an elderly woman,” Wong says, looking down. “Beyond that, most candies are mass-produced in mainland China, even if they are sold from steel carts.” Faced with this steady erosion of the craft, Wong set out to halt its decline. Bamboo Garden traces its beginnings to 1994. Its name pays homage to the residential building where he once lived in Hong Kong. For Wong, bamboo symbolises resilience in Chinese culture and evokes the panda, while “garden” represents Hong Kong as a Chinese city.

In 2014, dragon beard candy making was included in Hong Kong’s first Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory. Behind Wong’s relaxed demeanour lie years of disciplined practice, each strand of sugar pulled with virtuosity and care.

Perfecting the craft :

Over the years, Wong experimented with various trades, including selling fresh juice and shaved ice with fruit (鮮果冰 sin1 gwo2 bing1), before ultimately deciding to continue his father’s dragon beard candy-making legacy. He has since passed the craft on to his son. During a trip to Canada with his wife, he bought dragon beard candy in one of the country’s Chinatowns, only to find its texture inferior to the version his father made.

The experience prompted him to rethink both the craft and its reach. He became determined to develop a version that could serve as a souvenir for local and international visitors. “Normally, if we make the candy, it would stick to our teeth and glue together after a few hours,” he explains. And so he spent more than a year testing key variables, from sourcing desiccated coconut from Thailand and Indonesia to controlling the oil released by heated peanuts and sesame seeds, which can accelerate oxidation and shorten shelf life. Bamboo Garden says its preservative-free candy can remain crisp for up to a year in sealed packaging. Wong also experimented with the wrapping and package design.

After speaking with us, Wong takes his place before a glass box filled with cornflour (粟粉 suk1 fan2), like a conductor waiting for the audience to settle before a performance. Calm and composed, he presents a transparent, tennis-ball-sized lump of sugar paste (糖膠 tong4 gaau1) made from maltose or corn syrup, noting that it must be kept at room temperature for optimal handling. Temperature, he explains, is crucial: warmth keeps the sugar pliable while it is pulled, while the cooler conditions at Bamboo Garden’s San Po Kong factory help preserve the candy’s signature lightness once it is formed.

He begins by piercing a hole through its centre, shaping it into a doughnut. He stretches the ring, folds it and pulls again, gradually transforming the thick loop into something like a twisted pretzel and then, through repeated motions, into increasingly fine strands. After roughly 13 or 14 rounds, the mass loosens into delicate threads akin to angel-hair pasta or a spider’s web. Once the desired fineness is achieved, he deftly divides it into ten portions, using his thick fingers like scissors.

Then the master confectioner pauses. A small crowd gathers around the kiosk, drawn to the quiet precision of his craft. He asks them to guess how many strands the full mass contains. Five hundred? “Be more confident with your guesses,” he bellows. “Three thousand,” we venture. He smiles. The answer? Closer to 16,000 strands per portion.

Returning to his craft, he places crushed peanuts on the delicate strands, then carefully rolls the fine, latticed sugar around the filling. He finishes by placing each completed candy in a small white wrapper and arranging the pieces on a large transparent tray. In a dry, sealed packet, the strands remain more distinct; in the humid conditions of the demonstration, Wong explains, moisture causes them to cling together. The result is a morsel with a delicate, light texture. “It’s crispy, with a pleasant mouthfeel,” he says. “That’s an element that sets us apart.”

Dare to be different :

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Like many declining crafts in Hong Kong, dragon beard candy struggles to survive. “There are no rivals in our industry. We really respect each other,” Wong says. What distinguishes his shop, he adds, is the fineness of its sugar strands, which he says can be up to three times thinner than those of competitors. To modernise the traditional snack, he has introduced a wide range of fillings. Alongside peanut, white sesame and black sesame, Wong offers variations including almond, pumpkin seed, popping candy and chocolate.

To help sustain the craft, Bamboo Garden has also turned to public engagement. Beyond selling candy, the shop invites local and international audiences to experience the technique firsthand, with a particular focus on younger generations. Weekend family workshops draw everyone from kaifong (local residents) to high-profile visitors such as singer Kay Tse On-kay and her daughter and, more recently, Lucy, a young influencer known for videos about her daily life. The company also visits schools to demonstrate candy-making and introduce students to Chinese culture, including at Causeway Bay Victoria Kindergarten & International Nursery and Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui St. Simon’s Sai Kung Nursery School.

Thread by thread :

As members of the local community, surely there is something we can all do to maintain the candy’s heritage. Wong responds with a loud chuckle. “Honestly, we can only make it to the best of our abilities.” For him, that means staying committed to the craft: drawing younger generations towards the candy, sharing his knowledge in schools and building wider awareness through media and public engagement.

Even with these efforts, Wong remains ambitious. “I’d like to open more stores. In fact, I hope more dragon beard candy masters will open their own [shops] too, so the industry ultimately survives and gains greater visibility,” he says. Looking ahead, he envisions taking the craft beyond Hong Kong, whether by opening his own shops overseas or passing on his knowledge as a consultant or teacher.