

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2016**

Plenary 3: New Thinking for International Exchange

Know Yourself, Establish Mutual Trust)

Full transcript of the speech by Dr Fredric Mao, Convener of Hong Kong – Taiwan Cultural Cooperation Committee

Thank you Professor Leong for the introduction. Also thank you to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council for inviting me to participate in the Roundtable. Talking about the new thinking of international exchange, I have to pre-warn you that I am going to disappoint you, because I have nothing new to say. I don't have a long speech. I don't have big pictures. I have no data, no charts and no figures. But I think it is the time for me to take this opportunity to talk about some of my personal experience in international exchange or cultural exchange. My points are small, some even old, but also can be new.

I would like to talk about three major points. First, a good cultural exchange is a partnership that requires you to know the others and yourself, and eventually you create and build trust. In my experience it is very important for a sound exchange. Today, they gave me a title: the Convener of the Hong Kong-Taiwan Cultural Cooperation Committee. I'd be glad to start from there. It is an organisation under the umbrella of the Hong Kong-Taiwan Economic and Cultural Cooperation and Promotion Council. The Committee has been established since 2011, and I have the honour to be the Convener for the Committee of the Hong Kong side. Since 2012, one of the major events we have done is to present ourselves in the Taipei Arts Festival every year. This year is our fifth in Taipei presenting the Hong Kong Week. Working in Taipei these years we've learnt a great deal. First of all, we found out that it is so important to know our friends in Taiwan. We do know them. We know them very well. Personally we have a lot of contact with them, but to actually know another place and people, establish a relationship and friendship, and most importantly, build mutual trust, takes time. When we have trust, we can see the work is building up every year. We can do better work because we have the support, not only from ourselves but also from the people of Taiwan.

I can think of two examples of what we have done. It is an illustration of the kind of support we can gain by putting efforts to know each other. Last year, we had a fantastic exhibition in Taipei because the Festival included many different disciplines, e.g. drama, music, dance, visual art, design, architecture, film and animation. We had an architect exhibition in Taipei and with the

support of CreateHK, another department from Hong Kong Government, we can bring a large group of people to re-represent us and introduce our architects. A group of twenty young architects arrived in Taipei. They did not have their works in hand but they showed their concepts through twenty different models demonstrating what they want to do.

Last week, we had a meeting with the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority. We talked about our wish to give our young architects more opportunities to do something at the West Kowloon, because these young people really deserve our attention.

When we wanted to do a modern art exhibition in Taipei, at the beginning there were a lot of doubts about the kind of presentation and exhibition we can do. But when they eventually realised what we want to do, they really supported us. Last year, the prestigious Museum of Modern Art in Taipei offered us an exhibition period of one month and a half, a total of two floors, to display nine modern art products created by Hong Kong modern artists and designers. We really got public attention in Taiwan.

From these experiences we have learnt that we have to know ourselves and also to know the others. Then you can create a dialogue, in which we have exchange and mutual support.

As for exchange, I can think of a couple stories. I just came back from Beijing last night and I am working on a production that I had done before. Several years ago I was invited by the China National Peking Opera Company to direct a show that was originally created in Hong Kong. It is a drama called *Derling Yu Cixi* (德寧與慈禧). From Hong Kong to Beijing, they saw our drama production in Cantonese, and they were interested and wanted to do a production out of it. I was very honoured to be invited to direct it. I was lucky to have grown up with all kinds of Chinese traditional theatre, and they know I love Chinese theatre, but when I arrived to direct the show, the director of the National Peking Opera Company warned me. He said, “you know, Mr Mao, all of our very top directors from China come to our company to direct the show. Yet as much as we know how important and great they are, all of our company actors called them ‘the Killer of Chinese Opera’ (戲劇殺手)”. I wondered why. He told me this is how the actors think of directors, especially those from western theatre. He therefore warned me to be careful and be tender with them. However, when I worked with them, I realised that was not the case. And I know the reason. As a director, we want to show off. We often want to show our artistry, and we have lots of ideas. When you impose them onto another discipline, another art form, there could be troubles. But, if you know their work, if you care about their work, if you are interested in their work, and if you want to work with them, then a lot of things can be done. Not only I could offer them what I would like to do to enrich their work, but in return they receive it with all the willingness. Last week, I was asked to go back to rework the play after it had been done for several years. They were really proud of their work and wanted to bring it abroad. I was very welcomed. They know that I am going to support them. I think that is true exchange.

However, I have another experience I would also like to share with you. A couple of years ago, a major Chinese production company had a chance to do a collaboration with an Australian theatre company. They have a fantastic idea. They want to do an original musical Madame Butterfly, not the opera but a musical. The Chinese would provide the script and the music. The cast would be a mix of Chinese and Australian. The production would be done by the Australian theatre company. When I was asked to see the show at the opening, the artistic director from the Chinese company was very eager to ask me what I thought of it. I had to tell him the truth: “you’ve wasted a great chance.” Everyone worked very hard. The Australian theatre company did an excellent job in the production, design, lighting, sound, costume, everything. The Chinese and Australian actors worked very well together. But unfortunately, the Chinese script and the music did not bring any of their identity into it. They made an imitation of Puccini’s Madame Butterfly. I am sorry to say, as an artist, I was so disappointed, because I care and I think that was an opportunity for sharing and collaboration, and making something new. Again, I have to say you have to know about yourself. I said to the director, “you should be very proud to have the opportunity to tell your story. You are today’s Madame Butterfly. With your sense of music, what do you want to do?” Even though this is just one case, I firmly believe, according to my professional experience, knowing each other and yourself is so important. It is a foundation for good collaboration and exchange.

Last but not least, for today’s cultural exchange, whether internationally, regionally or among our own community, an open and creative mind to embrace the others, share new experiences and invent seems to be a must. Unfortunately, it is not always true. Why? Here comes my third point.

Most of the time, the people who are in the position to nurture, support, assist and build cultural exchange do not necessarily create an environment or platform that is responding to the need of the artists. Sometimes, they have all the best intention, but without knowing each other. As Mr Upston said earlier, the core is the artists. If we know the artists – what they are, who they are, what they want to do – and we share our knowledge, then we can truly promote innovation, breed a kind of creative synergy and attract people to invest themselves in the art form, in what they believe in.

After working many years in performing arts, I really want to see more young people to be willing to invest themselves in these kinds of work. Not only should they invest in the work by themselves, but they also need support. They need support from people who play other roles. The 21st century is a different time, different from when I started as a young man. Today artists themselves will also have to take responsibilities. They have to be in charge of what they want to do, not just saying “I am the artist. I am being creative.” I think they should be involved in building a better system that can do the kind of work we all want to see it happens. This is the kind of exchange I believe in, because it builds mutual trust. My point is to build the trust among

different parties and different roles. From my experience, whether it is country to country, region to region, person to person, trust is very important. This is the sharing I have with you for today. Thank you.

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