



Hong Kong Arts Development Council
Planning & Research Department
June 12, 1999

Strategic Development Board
“The media and Arts Promotion” Public Forum
Report

The forum, chaired by Dr Patrick Ho and held in the Park Lane Hotel on 12th June 1999, was attended by 16 speakers comprising academics, arts practitioners and media representatives. Guests numbering 113 from an enrolment of 160 filled the floor. They included representatives from RTHK, Ming Pao, SCMP, Sing Tao Daily, Hong Kong Daily News, Ta Kung Pao, cultural programme office of the municipal councils, the Music Office, Provisional Urban Council Press Office, District Councils, and staff and representatives from the Canadian Consulate.

Dr Ho expressed the hope in his welcome address that a win-win solution for the improvement of the press and cultural environment would result from the brainstorming of the academics, frontline journalists, arts practitioners and others present. He pointed out that an ideal quality newspaper should committed to, not just social monitoring and issue interpretation, but also be a forewarning system to expose hidden crisis, and, a social educator to enlighten public vision and nudge social conscience when it is meaningful to do so. The Council, on the other hand, is committed to be a bridge between the artists and the arts lovers. It is the Strategic Development Board’s wish to gain a deeper understanding of their inter-relationship and the issues involved. Though focused on the print media this time, there would be forums, respectively, on the relationship between arts promotion and the electronic media and information technology later in the year.

Session One: Media’s Role in Arts and Cultural Development

Speaker Professor Chan Chi-fai said that the cultural sector should, first of all, put itself into the shoes of the press and re-evaluate their coverage from the point of view of the press: What is the newspaper owner’s general directive? How much editorial freedom is allowed to an individual editor? What really goes to their heart? Only by knowing the answers can there be talks of co-operation and actual collaboration, or even strategic development. For comprehensive promotion, the best way is to engage the newspaper publishers, or consider the “piggy-back” strategy. It is the injection of cultural elements into popular pages such as the sports page (such as vocal music performance in the World

Cup Ceremonies).

Individual quality of the cultural programmes of course plays a vital role. Quality programmes with communicative artists make promotion easy.

In his post forum proposal, Professor Chan pointed out that cultural promotion needs detailed planning, comprehensive strategies, long-term vision (5-10 year plans) and clear-cut targets (enhance connection with newspapers that boast a cultural page, persuade marginal newspapers to increase their coverage, and, for the time being, ignore newspapers that do not cover cultural events).

Speaker Professor Chu Lap remarked that private-run media are inevitably profit-oriented, with the sense of mission hardly their priority. Discriminative readers of quality newspapers, though they may belong to the high-income bracket, are hardly the compulsive consumers that draw advertisements. It is next to impossible to expect newspaper owners who are apathetic to arts to endorse a cultural page. The advocacy and dissemination of arts and culture relies, then, on the public media, like RTHK and the cultural monthly of the two municipal councils. Lacking local cultural icons, arts can be advocated through top down dissemination with political leaders setting the trend through their high-profile participation.

Local television stations, who could have done better, all too often fail to grasp even the basics of Chinese culture. So we ended up with a Disney Mulan and the Mulan by ATV flares even worse. We should not pin our hopes on newspapers with a massive circulation. Though quality newspapers and the public media need to be subsidised, this is more than compensated by the subsequent social and cultural enrichment. Public media deserve our investment; the public media in European countries being fine examples.

Speaker Ms Chu King-oi, cultural magazine editor, pointed out that many front-line media workers do have a sense of mission. However, without mid-level and senior level endorsement, what they can accomplish is very limited. Newspapers with Chinese background aside, cultural pages are the products of long evolution. Taking up inner pages, they are taken as part of the leisure section only. It has to be pointed out, however, that cultural services of the Urban Council are also primarily concerned with recreation and entertainment. Now with the latest trend of covering news as infotainment, it is even more unlikely that the cultural page will be expanded. Even *Ming Pao* does not inject that many resources into its culture section.

Newspaper policy is also subject to changes. Often regarded as a closed circle, it is

doubtful the cultural sector will be embraced by newspapers in general.

Speaking as a media researcher, Dr Lo Wai-lik remarked that the unilateral dissemination through the media is not necessarily the best model for cultural advocacy. He suggested a holistic model of cultural dissemination. It is like home education: a matter of what sense of value we would like our next generation to possess.

Local newspapers invariably boast a sports section of several pages. It is a result of heavy global promotion of sports, not because we are sports lovers. Actually we are not. The popularity of tennis is very much a Michael Chang phenomenon.

If we want our media to be culturally focused, we first have to have that focus in the family and in school, and introspection of how to pass on our heritage.

There are newspapers with cultural advocacy as their mission. However, they do not enjoy commercial returns or subsidies for their effort. Promotion requires creativity and tenacity. When ATV bought the sleeper *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, only a handful of producers were assigned for its promotion. The rest is history. It proves that quality, and the grip on audience preference, counts.

Take Composition Subject in secondary school for instance. Too few teachers know how to make full use of its potential. Experiments have shown that composition lesson offers the opportunity for the teaching creativity in writing. It shows that too much of the resources within the existing system is underutilised.

Discussion Summary

Mr Alexander Wong pointed out that environment protection, previously not on the global agenda, has become an important political issue after media advocacy and education. The advocacy was so successful, even salmons return to the cleaned up Thames.

Mr Cheng Ming-fung of RTHK remarked that, without a complementary social environment, mission might be too heavy a word for cultural programmes to carry.

Programmes, cultural or otherwise, have to relate to daily life and possess universal values for easy promotion. An anonymous member of the audience said that cultural page is not a rider. There are people who buy the *Economic Journal* just for its cultural page.

Leung Po-shan criticised the policy of “column commissioning”, not the policy itself, but the quality of the columns that has much room for improvement. All in all, the columns do serve their purpose.

Session Two: Art Groups/Arts Practitioners and the Media

Speaker Mr Tam Siu-man said that a balance should be struck between what the readers want to read and what the readers should read; the latter being the edification function of the press. Though on good terms with the press, coverage for the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, his employer, is not guaranteed, unless there happens to be some selling points in the line-up concerned.

For a Beethoven or Mozart concert, the press focus may be on the performers instead of the composers. To ensure the right coverage, a comprehensive promotion strategy is necessary to disseminate the art group’s aims and commitments, and to co-ordinate press release and interviews to arouse audience expectation. To make full use of media exposure and the free publicity, good timing is required. It must be kicked off before the performers’ arrival. A targeted promotional campaign has decisive effect on audience expectation and box office performance.

Speaker Mr Benny Chia said that media preference for “blood” and the “sensational” is an unavoidable universal trend. Even in a piano concert, the press focus may be on celebrities sneaking out from the restroom instead of on the pianist. Ours is a city that handicaps cultural dissemination. We have streets named after bankers, but we have no street named after Xiao Hung to commemorate her creative years and death here.

In a civilized society, arts play a vital role in general aesthetics and education. Local people tend to find artists incomprehensible and generally fail to appreciate arts directors’ efforts. Artists have to do their part, through their creativity, to regain public trust and rebuild their public image.

Television stations can also give a hand by providing advance notice of upcoming cultural events instead of offering sports headlines after the main evening news. (Note: It was the practice in the 70s to give a summary of cultural events after the news.)

Speaker Mr Ho Hing-kei remarked that arts should not be forced down people’s throat as bitter medicine, “hard to swallow but good for you”. Arts reviews should be as accommodating as “Yellow Bus”, and as communicative. We should not take the sense of mission for granted but rather treat it as a bonus from the media. What we should look for from the media is mutual fulfilment of expectation. For their own dignity, artists need not

stoop for exposure; however, they should also avoid unnecessary bad press. When the community is ripe for arts, arts will bloom. It is not something that can be forced. It is also not worthwhile to bend over backwards for courting publicity.

Discussion Summary

Lo Lik-wai responded that active publicity would have to be sought when there are more professional artists depending on their art for a living. Benny Chia, on his part, said that the social need of, and identity to, arts is not necessarily in synchronicity with creativity, but usually a few steps behind. Hence, we need not be too pessimistic. Alexander Wong remarked that, to ensure marketability, commercial consideration is too important to be ignored, even during the creative process. Young Yu-ping pointed out that post-war commercialism is created, not born. Local media, Chan Ching-kiu said, like the society, is mass-oriented. However, the media is not the mass, and the promotion of arts is not just the promotion of individual programmes but also artistic ideals and beliefs. Film festivals and arts festivals are not the monopoly of rich countries. What the media should promote and disseminate, is artistic ideals and beliefs.

To make a point, have the local media ever focused on the artistic achievements of Andy Lau? An Anonymous member of the audience commented that arts reviews are hard to read, which does not facilitate arts promotion. He further pointed out that arts and daily life are not mutually exclusive. The practice of putting famous paintings on souvenirs such as mugs or handkerchiefs is one way of bringing arts into daily life, and to the people.

Council Secretary General Tseng Sun-man remarked that subsidised art groups are not forbidden from opening up their markets. They are also encouraged to develop promotional activities, like parent-child bonding activities or school concerts.

Session 3: the Public, the Media, and the Arts

Legislator the Hon Ma Fung-kwok said that artists, the media and the public are inter-dependent. The Government, on the other hand, has the responsibility to initiate cultural dissemination. CCTV, for instance, brought quality art to the people by including the Vienna Spring Concert in the Spring Festival Programme lineup. Local arts activities are still regarded as elite activities. The promotion of arts is a joint effort that requires the high-profile participation of officials and celebrities to attract media coverage and public awareness. Arts reviews should also be more reader-friendly to enlarge readership.

Art critic Mr Leung Man-to pointed out that critics and cultural page editors often do not see eye-to-eye. What critics find short and plain; editors still think them too long and too difficult. In the long run, what we should foster is journalistic art criticism for newspapers to attract general readers. Genuine art reviews, in the most professional sense, should be left for niche magazines such as *Left and Right*. To realise the universal right for artistic and cultural enrichment, it is essential that arts be promoted and disseminated for general appreciation.

Using Taipei Mayor Ma Yin-jiu's high profile search for "Resident City Artist" as an example, Council member Mr Lam Hon-kin explained that to promote arts, we first have to understand the promotion target. The potential art lovers, he said, have the following common traits: communicative, trendy, fad-loving, showing-off, cultured and cherishing opportunities for education. Thus, arts programmes should be artfully packaged and promoted as city topics to generate the herd effect and bring in audience.

Film critic Mr Li Cheuk-to pointed out that social edification is very often not on the media's agenda. Market-oriented, they follow only the market demand; and sometimes, even create the demand. For an art-loving public, there must first be a substantial universal education and the proper social ambience. Hong Kong used to have quite a number of foundation supported literary publications; now we have virtually none. Culturally speaking, we suffer from a lack of diversity.

To sum up, editors should stick their ground to ensure art reviews are plain and simple.

Discussion Summary

Dr Ho urged speakers to delve into the juxtaposition of cultural domain with other domains. Lam Hon-kin responded that once a cultural issue is politicised, the cultural aspect is often ignored in media coverage. The Oil Street incident was a fine example.

Li Cheuk-to urged artists not to marginalise themselves, but be more active in offering their own side of the story. Leung Man-to remarked that arts practitioners should make the initiative of entering into other domains such as politics or the commercial sector to enlarge their audience. Tang Shu-wing of No Man's Land did not approve spin-off merchandise, or the involvement in politics. He remarked that artists should not stoop to the public's level. On the contrary, public appreciation should be elevated to meet the artists' level. Ma Fung-kwok, however, countered that it would be dubious for some work to claim the word art, if it fails even to win "low brow" appreciation. Cheng Ming-fung of RTHK explained that RTHK cultural programmes are confined by resources restriction.

However, the limitation of mainstream broadcast is broken by the advent of new technology. Now internet allows not only an online league of art critics, but also instant exchanges of ideas. Jimmy Choi of Arts Centre, though, expressed his worries that the internet will only widen the knowledge gap.

Session 4: Media and the Way Forward for Arts Development

Cultural editor of the Economic Journal, Ms Leung Koon-lai remarked that for arts to have a mass appeal, it must carry a social message. In the Western world, the prevalence of arts is not the result of promotion. In the old days, classical church arts were made popular by woodblock printing. Such printings were sold, and thus generating revenues, for its biblical themes, entertainment value, or even healing power. Traditional Chinese arts were inherently elite arts because of their literati origin and limitation. Prior to the 50s, local Chinese arts were basically elite arts. Artistically speaking, the British rule did not leave a deep universal impact. Cultural dissemination needs promotion strategies. However, too much hard sell may lead to backlash.

The dissemination of arts covers not just the works, the ideals and the beliefs, but also artistic self-expression. The July 16th Incident (Right of Abode controversy) and the June Fourth memorial The Flying Frenchman are ripe topics for artistic expression.

Dr Chan Ching-kiu of Lingnan University observed that, compared to other cities, local cultural demand lags far behind. He found this worrying complacency the result of self-congratulation over the last decade. Cultural richness and awareness cannot be achieved in a day. Take Poland for example; when the International Critics Conference was held in Warsaw; attendees were surprised by a Presidential invitation. When promoting culture, the Government need to differentiate the consumers from the people. Catering to the consumers' whims will only lead to the vicious circle of perpetuating bad taste.

Ming Pao supplement Editor-in-Chief Mr Chiu Loi-fat remarked that the cultural sector does not have a correct understanding of the media operation and mentality. Hence, what they expect from the media more often than not, is wishful thinking. Take "column commissioning" for instance, it has not taken into account the editorial operation. Difficulties arise in page setting and article commissioning. A newspaper has to work according to its editorial directive. It is much simpler, and more effective, to subsidise cultural page staff expense instead.

Mr Wu Yan-wai of Zuni Icosahedron would like to see more professional and in-depth coverage from the media. He pointed out that *Ming Pao* and the *Oriental Daily* are just as popular as they were a decade ago. However, the coverage then was much more in-depth and precise than it is today. It only shows that the current ambience is anti-intellectual. In such an environment, for self-improvement, it is left to the people to be self-demanding; to have interests in their surrounding and not to blindly follow the crowd. It is the public's expectation that the public media (RTHK) should commit itself to a lucid cultural policy.

Discussion Summary

Leung Po-shan of Artspace advocated public art in public place. He used makeshift theatres of the '60s as an example. He further explained that public art is not simply the installation of art pieces in public places but the building of public identity. It is hoped that through such displays, public appreciation of arts will be elevated. To achieve this goal, the media can play the role of interpreter.

Others too agreed that an abundance of public art pieces does not necessarily equate a successful dissemination of arts. The provision of rubbish bins does not necessarily make a clean city. *Sing Tao Daily* reporter Au Wai-lin pointed out that the public welcome street arts. It is a very cost-effective means of promotion. In response to Leung Po-shan's query, Wu Yan-wai remarked that cultural coverage suffers from the lack of veteran cultural reporters. Cultural page fails to keep talents because of its limited career development and it is hard to expect in-depth coverage and analysis from rookie reporters.

Chairman's Closing Remarks

Dr Ho pointed out that the Council is committed to a "two-pronged" development strategy; that is, strive for artistic excellence on the one hand, and promote the popularisation of arts on the other. This forum, by raising questions, has served as a starting point for future development.

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