

The Future of Our Arts and Culture: A View from Hong Kong

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Hong Kong's cultural and arts sector's post-pandemic recovery has been heartening, fuelled by the enthusiasm of local arts groups and audiences. Now, as the city seeks to redefine itself as an East-meets-West centre for international cultural exchange, Winsome Chow, from her vantage point at the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, expresses her hopes for the Hong Kong Government's new Culture Commission.

Recovering from the three-year pandemic, it's clear that Hong Kong has experienced many changes. Despite the challenges, the cultural and arts sector has bounced back with more and better arts performances, exhibitions, and activities. Arts groups, whether supported by public funds or not, have returned to normal operations, many with more vigour and impact. Audiences from local community have responded so enthusiastically that our participation rate (which includes physical or alternative modes of events) has increased to 78%, which is a 17% point increase compared to 2020.

The pandemic had surely been a serious threat, but it also stimulated among practitioners in the cultural and arts sector a sense of solidarity and the spirit to rise above adversity. In the course of my decades-long work in Hong Kong as a performing arts programmer, festival curator and arts administrator, I regularly heard leaders in the sector, linked by their strong sense of rapport, exchange words of mutual encouragement.

Currently, Hong Kong is onstage again. Its concert halls, theatres and museums reopened in late 2022, and in that last quarter, I heard the best concerts in recent years by the territory's three major orchestras, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Hong Kong

Chinese Orchestra and Hong Kong Sinfonietta, at their season opening. Tickets for the Hong Kong Ballet performances and two commercially presented theatrical productions, with a performance run of 50 to 60 performances, were snapped up within hours of their release. Earlier this year, it was back to business for the art fairs, Art Basel and Art Central. All these glittering events took place in a calendar featuring a wide spectrum of works and activities presented by hundreds of small and medium-sized arts groups and collectives.

Clearly, Hong Kong is not the "cultural desert" some had labelled it five decades ago. We are a city and people that have come to love arts and culture. In fact, historically, Hong Kong has always been a place of cultural exchange, though its mix of content has evolved through various eras. At present, Hong Kong is redefining itself as a cultural hub that welcomes, encourages, and supports international cultural exchange, a cultural centre where the East meets the West. This aspiration has been recognised in our country's National 14th Five-Year Plan.

Looking forward, what does it mean for Hong Kong to play a role as an international cultural exchange centre? This question intrigues me as a practitioner who has walked through a few decades of our cultural and arts development, and even more so after the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government set up a Culture Commission this year with the following terms of reference.

The Commission is responsible for:

1. The policy, strategy and initiatives for Hong Kong's arts, culture and creative industries development with a view to realising the vision of turning Hong Kong into an East-meets-West Centre for International Cultural Exchange, including formulating a

Blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development with a view to creating a more complete ecology for the development of the sectors; nurturing and attracting talent; nurturing arts groups, developing audience, promoting cross-sectoral and cross-genre collaboration, as well as promoting arts and cultural exchanges between Hong Kong and the Mainland as well as the rest of the world;

2. The associated funding strategy to further the above objectives; and
3. The strategy to encourage the private sector's participation in promoting the development of arts, culture and creative industries.

The Culture Commission is a committee set up by the Government, an addition to the many existing advisory and administrative committees established to develop and promote the arts. It is not the first such committee in Hong Kong. The last one was set up in 2000 when Professor Chang Hsin-kang was appointed the Chairman of the Culture and Heritage Commission to lead a committee of over 20 members comprising scholars, architects, jewellery designers, sculptors, cultural veterans, and business leaders as well as government representatives. The Commission issued a Policy Recommendation Report in 2003, making over 100 recommendations based on six strategies focused on the themes of “people-oriented”, “pluralism”, “freedom of expression and protection of intellectual property”, “holistic approach”, “partnership” and “community-driven”. The vision for Hong Kong is well-captured in the Commission's report: “If Hong Kong becomes a city where life is celebrated through cultural pursuit, a city where its people are enchanted by the arts, enlightened by different cultures and enriched by

social diversity, we will certainly have a vibrant cultural scene. Our vision to turn Hong Kong into an international cultural metropolis will not be an unrealistic goal”.

20 years have passed, and the six strategies have succeeded in many ways, especially in areas where public funding and resources are involved. For instance, the nine major performing arts groups are funded by the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau (CSTB), while all medium and small arts groups are funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC). As part of their “holistic approach”, both CSTB and HKADC have Matching Fund Schemes to incentivise arts groups to find partners and supporters in the community and to increase both commercial sponsorship and private donations.

Under the Matching Fund Scheme of HKADC, more than \$80 million dollars have been raised from the private sector for 175 projects since 2016. Performing arts venues managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department also have venue partners to enhance their respective characters. The redistribution of the Government's responsibilities and businesses made possible the setting up of the CSTB last year which oversees the creative industries, arts and culture, sports and tourism under one roof.

So why has the Government set up a Culture Commission? From the terms of reference listed earlier, it is clear the Government expects new ideas and propositions from the Culture Commission which will lead to “a Blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development”.

In my mind, the Culture and Heritage Commission set up in 2000 had shed light on the “WHY” and “WHAT” in justifying public support for Hong Kong's arts and culture. The current Culture

Commission now aims to consolidate what is good for Hong Kong while expanding the geographical reach of and professional depth in the arts. It also puts more emphasis on building an ecology, and developing a commercial sensibility within the arts, culture and creative sector. In a sense, 2023's Culture Commission focuses on the "HOW": how will Hong Kong become the hub for international cultural exchange, especially in connection and collaboration with the Mainland? It also addresses the challenge of HOW to build a sustainable ecosystem as well as HOW the arts, culture and creative industries can add impetus to the economy.

The Culture Commission is chaired by the Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Mr Yeung Yun-hung Kevin with the support of Vice-Chairman Dr Wilfred Wong Ying-wai, Chairman of the Hong Kong Film Development Council and Hong Kong International Film Festival and former Chairman of HKADC. They lead over 25 members comprising legislative councillors, antique dealers, arts collectors, scholars, arts veterans, property developers and businessmen as well as entertainment industry leaders, many of whom have experience on other boards and advisory committees of the Government and public organisations.

For a new commission focusing more on HOW, a review of the implementation of recommendations by the former commission is a good point to start. Many of the over 100 recommendations from the former commission have been implemented in the arts ecology supported by public funding and resources. However, I feel there is still room for the private sector to increase their support for the arts and culture. There is a need for the Commission to come up with bold ideas to capitalise on the resources of the private sector in the development of arts and culture.

One idea that it can consider is to create new platforms for the arts. Arts and culture, like all other businesses in Hong Kong, is constrained by the lack of land and space. The Government needs to take the initiative to cut across its bureaus and departments and come up with a customer-oriented, long-term approach that empowers the private sector to use their facilities and spaces for the purposes of arts and culture. Times have changed and there should be answers to questions like why a restaurant for 200 customers cannot be turned into a late-night performance space for concerts, or why a party venue cannot be turned into a small theatre, and so on. With a clear pathway for the private sector, selected operators with a good record and resources can trial this new platform, and the arts and culture can be integrated into community life more deeply and widely.

Another idea is for Hong Kong to create its own international performing arts platform to complement similar platforms in the world. This would be an industry exchange platform as well as a showcase of professional works to be enjoyed by local people and visitors of Hong Kong. HKADC is already planning the Hong Kong Performing Arts Expo (EXPO) for mid-October 2024. Hong Kong has led artist delegations to many different international performing arts platforms in Canada, Korea, Germany, Netherlands, and Australia. It is now time for international industry leaders, artists, practitioners, groups, and institutions to meet in Hong Kong and show one another their works and proposals in exchange. EXPO will also be a springboard for them to connect with professionals from Mainland China and the Asia Pacific region. Indeed, long before the pandemic, HKADC had already established deeper relationships with similar arts organisations in Singapore, Korea, Japan, and other neighbouring Southeast Asian countries.

EXPO will provide a broader platform with which organisations, arts groups and individuals may connect and reconnect with one another as well as reinforce their relationships in collaboration. I know our Hong Kong artists, arts groups and institutions are also getting ready to show their best.

One dream of many generations of arts practitioners has been to produce a long-running Cantonese musical. This, I believe, should help realise the Culture Commission's many goals. This will involve charting out a long-term plan, including setting up a dedicated company and forming production teams. With a build-up of many performances, and the necessary modifications and improvements, such a production may tour the Greater Bay Area in Southern China, then move onto a tour of the Chinese-speaking communities in the region, and further onwards to other parts of the world. The term "long-run musical" should not be a concept that blocks our minds and blinds our eyes. HOW to tackle the challenges will be the mandate of this generation of arts leaders and workers.

In pursuing such "dream" projects, the question of HOW investment should be shared between public funding and the private sector also needs to be addressed. This should not be an excuse for the Government to make fewer provisions for arts and culture. Rather, it should fuel an attempt to embrace more talents from different professional worlds, encouraging them to innovate together. A strong incentive for investment from the private sector will surely help industry development take flight. It is only with openness, professional practice, and innovation that the arts development of Hong Kong can be taken to another level.

There is one more strategic direction the Culture Commission may consider. While Hong Kong has

inherited a strong legacy of Chinese culture, it has also, for more than a century, absorbed Western culture, especially that of the English-speaking world. It is such a background which makes Hong Kong unique. With broad strides made over the decades in finance, trading and now the professional services industry, Hong Kong has changed dramatically. It is time for Hong Kong to consolidate and play to our strengths in the promotion of Chinese culture and the traditions which are an integral part of our lives. Our distinctive cultural heritage and connectivity with the world enable us to present Chinese culture from our unique Hong Kong perspective and with an international outlook markedly different from the way Chinese arts and culture are conceived and presented in the Mainland. In fact, Hong Kong artistic talents may come up with creative ideas to tell Chinese stories in ways that connect with a global audience.

Whatever recommendations the Culture Commission will finally make, I am confident that they will be shaped with an understanding of the six strategies and ideas that the former Culture and Heritage Commission laid down. They can provide the foundation as well as a checklist and reference with which the leaders of our city may develop plans and actions that will further Hong Kong's interests in the long run. □

About The Author



As the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, Winsome Chow has initiated many vital strategies and schemes over the years, including various grant schemes and the arts space scheme. The Support Scheme that she devised to distribute the government's relief fund helped artists and practitioners get through the pandemic. She also sought sponsorship to engage 68 arts units in a HK\$25 million project, the Arts Go Digital Platform Scheme. She was bestowed the International Citation of Merit by the International Society for the Performing Arts (ISPA) in 2022. Chow keenly promotes cultural exchange and led over 700 arts practitioners to various overseas festivals, expos, and arts markets in Europe, America, and Australia before the pandemic. She has been promoting Hong Kong arts programmes in major cities in the Mainland. She is now leading the organisation of the first Hong Kong Performing Arts Expo scheduled in mid-October 2024 in contribution to the country's National 14th Five Year Plan.

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