Theatre as Community Enterprise - The Hong Kong Experience

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Keywords
Spoken drama, funding for the arts, curriculum reform, diversity and open society

Abstract
In this paper, I will use the Hong Kong experience to illustrate how our city's arts industry is developed by giving a brief account of the history of traditional Chinese theatre, centenary development of modern theatre in China and Hong Kong, the government’s efforts in the provision of cultural and community venue facilities, funding support for professional companies and arts educational programs, as well as the role and commitment of the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre to the local community. There is also information about the city’s recent curriculum reform for development of young audiences. Finally I introduce the entrepreneurial West Kowloon Cultural District project to help provide an understanding of the policies and visions of Hong Kong in developing itself into an international cultural metropolis known for its openness and pluralism.

Biography
K.B. Chan is a veteran arts administrator in Hong Kong, and the first Executive Director of the incorporated Hong Kong Repertory Theatre from April 2001. His career in the arts industry began with his employment in the cultural division of the Hong Kong Government. With extensive knowledge and rich experience in program and venue management, he was a major contributor to the building of the Company’s flagship status and reputation in the region, promoted cross boundary collaborations and explored many cultural exchange tour opportunities. He is also the Secretary of the Hong Kong Federation of Drama Societies.
Introduction

Nowadays, no one will disagree with the fact that arts activities and/or theatre help add new dimensions to our everyday life, as well as serve as a stimulus for economic growth. The challenge any arts organisation faces today, in addition to seeking government support, is to successfully convince business communities of the many benefits in partnership when they sponsor the arts. How an arts company is branded and its products are promoted also evoke a multitude of initiatives. It has become the largest portion of any marketing department's responsibility.

We live in unique and fascinating times, and marketers of cultural programs have to keep up with their knowledge of community needs and government policies on social, cultural, educational and economic issues. We should always be aware of ever changing consumer behaviours so that we can understand our audience through targeted media and database technology. We believe an environment with diversified arts activities conducive to cultural participation encourages the development of new ideas and expressions, hence enhancing creative enterprise in the community.

In this paper, I will use the Hong Kong experience to illustrate how our arts industry developed. I will start by giving a brief account on the history of theatre in China and Hong Kong, our efforts in the provision of cultural facilities, and then discuss funding support for theatre activities and arts education programs. Information on curriculum reform and the West Kowloon Cultural District project will help you understand the latest development of the cultural and educational scenes of our city, as well as how community building is increasing the quality of life of our people.

1. Traditional theatre in China

The Song dynasty (960 - 1129 A.D.) is notable for the rise of commerce and the growth of cities in China. Within this more urbanised environment, China's first fully developed theatre, namely zaju (various plays), emerged. Theatre in the Ming (1368 - 1664) and Qing (1664 - 1911) dynasties became very much a part of people's lives. However, performers were relegated to a very low status in society; one symbol of this being edicts forbidding them to sit for official examinations.

Beijing-style theatre dominated the traditional stage throughout the first half of the 20th century, as it enjoyed an enormous following among the ordinary people. A towering figure in Beijing theatre (also known as 'Beijing opera' or 'Peking opera'), Mr Mei Lanfang, helped the old theatre attain a new height of public esteem. His receptiveness to Western thinking gave him new aesthetic insights into theatre, and Bertolt Brecht was among those who admired Mei - he was deeply influenced by Mei's performances.

2. Centenary development of modern theatre in China and its relationship with Hong Kong theatre

The 20th century began with a movement to create a new theatre inspired by Western examples. Thousands of young intellectuals went abroad to study. Intellectuals who learnt about modernisation in Japan returned and became a major influence on the early development of modern Chinese theatre.
Spoken Drama

The first formal Chinese spoken drama performances were Camille and A Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven (adapted from Uncle Tom’s Cabin). In 1907, the Spring Willow Society put on these performances in Tokyo. The society was made up of students and exiles in Japan after the Qing Dynasty’s Hundred Day Reform.

Around the time of the 1911 Nationalist Revolution, members of the Spring Willow Society gradually returned home. They sowed the seeds for a ‘new drama’ or ‘civilised plays’ that took root and flourished. These included collaborations with education groups that put on professional performances.

From 1919, China’s burgeoning drama scene met up with the forces of the May Fourth Movement, addressing social and political needs for democracy, developing anti-feudalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-Japanese themes and providing revolutionary propaganda and education for the masses. There was little art for art’s sake among such repertoire.

But Chinese drama also started down the path of commercialisation and popularisation. Professional artists formed their own associations and went on tour. For example, the Chinese Touring Theatre Troupe travelled south to perform in Hong Kong in 1939.

After the 1841 Opium War, Hong Kong became a British colony, and its early years saw the emergence of a handful of ritual operas and Cantonese opera productions (a regional theatrical form of South China whose basic style of stage presentation is related to the renowned and refined Beijing opera).

Living side-by-side with Cantonese opera is Western-style modern Chinese drama – ‘spoken drama’. Hence one strand was represented by productions in the English language; they were almost exclusively mounted by British and American actors for the expatriate audience. The other and more important strand was Chinese-language productions staged by local theatre groups and by visiting mainland companies whose audience is the Chinese majority.

Propaganda/Patriotic drama

During the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s, Hong Kong people came out in droves to support the anti-Japanese campaign. Scholastic and amateur theatre groups were established and began to use spoken drama as a platform to express their anti-Japanese sentiments. In May 1939, more than forty groups from all over Hong Kong jointly presented a four-act historical drama Huanghuagang (one of the failed revolutionary attempts to overturn the Qing Dynasty at the beginning of the last century). Several hundred people worked both onstage and off, and all ticket proceeds were used to benefit war refugees. After the Marco Polo Bridge incident in 1937, many other theatre groups travelled south to Hong Kong, greatly raising the number of the city’s spoken drama productions.

Hong Kong fell to the Japanese in December of 1941. During three years and eight months of occupation, Hong Kong’s theatre scene was silent.

It is obvious that the development of Hong Kong theatre was inseparable from the southern migration of mainland theatre troupes and people’s participation in anti-Japanese relief activities.
Hong Kong’s own theatre path

After the end of World War II, Hong Kong’s theatre scene went through several different stages of development, taking its own distinctive path. Half a century later, a new generation of theatre professionals has come of age. Not only has professionally-trained talent entered the theatre scene, but the government has also injected funding which encourages diversified creativity and raises production quality. Today’s Hong Kong theatre is vibrant; it is a multi-coloured scene ‘where a hundred flowers bloom’.

Social awareness and political identity

The Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and the Chung Ying Theatre were both established by the end of the 1970s. These theatre companies increased the level of social awareness for theatre, and strengthened the collective identity of theatre professionals. In the 1980s, Hong Kong grew in prosperity and economic might. Along with the signing of the Joint Declaration between Great Britain and China, Hong Kong’s ‘political identity’ became a significant part of the people’s consciousness. They began to identify themselves with more confidence, and this mentality was reflected in dramatic scripts of that time. This is proof of the close relationship between theatre and society.

Bilingual theatre scene

As a bilingual society where Chinese and Western culture mix, Hong Kong possesses an ideal environment for performing both original English plays and translated stage works. Although English-language plays were produced every year, mainstream theatre produced mostly Western plays translated into Cantonese. Hong Kong theatre has amassed a large repertoire of translated plays, thanks to the local audiences’ openness and willingness to accept them. This trend of translations not only took root, but engendered in-depth research on this genre.

Drama education and community outreach

Under the Hong Kong government’s support and active participation, drama education has become an important part of the theatre scene. Many troupes, among them Chung Ying Theatre, Exploration Theatre and Ming Ri Theatre, have devoted much energy to community outreach and residencies within schools. Sometimes they use studio theatres to mount more experimental works. These programs enhance students’ and young people’s understanding of theatre. They serve two purposes: to extend market outreach, and sow new seeds for the future of theatre.

Critical theatres

Theatre employing political and social issues as dramatic materials, or stage productions set in ancient times that comment on the current regime’s success or failure, have attracted a significant audience segment and consequently are very influential. Zuni Icosahedron is an outstanding representative among such companies. In the 2008 New Vision Arts Festival, Theatre du Pif borrowed the creative dramatic approach of Britain’s Verbatim Theatre, putting together interviews made with professionals, people from different social strata, and people living in different localities in Hong Kong, as dramatic tapestry of interesting dialogue: The Will to Build is a large-scale theatre work encouraging the audience to look back and ponder on Hong Kong’s architectural history.
3. The role and commitment of the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre

The most important development in the contemporary Hong Kong theatre scene was the establishment in 1977 of the professional Hong Kong Repertory Theatre devoted to spoken drama. Founded and subsidised by the former Urban Council (the municipal council), its seasonal repertoires represented a unique balance and diversity of Chinese, Western and Hong Kong original plays. Its performances in Cantonese dialect and occasionally in Putonghua (Mandarin) over thirty years have set a standard for local theatre and audience in terms of artistic quality, creativity, productivity and popularity (six to eight plays per year, over 200 repertoires in thirty years).

Commitments to the local community

The Hong Kong Rep is among the nine Hong Kong flagship professional arts groups receiving annual financial assistance from the Home Affairs Bureau of the Government. It is registered as a nonprofit organisation exempt from tax. As a leading regional theatre, it is committed to producing mainstream theatrical works at theatres, as well as experimental plays at their own black box theatre. Promotion of arts appreciation and enriching the public’s cultural life are their mission.

The Hong Kong Rep has quite close ties with the local community because of the location of the company inside the Sheung Wan Municipal Services Building. As part of its services to the community, the company offers regular education theatre programs at schools and for local districts, reduced price matinees for students in the territory, as well as regular theatre courses and workshops for the charity and community organisations. In addition to these education and outreach initiatives, it provides platforms for new, young blood to develop their creative projects in the company’s black box theatre through collaborative engagement and joint presentations. In the current season, the company provides the inaugural class of graduating MFA directors of the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts a platform to practice their craft, with a view to nurturing a new generation of outstanding theatre professionals.

To tie in with education and curriculum reform in Hong Kong, the company cooperates with a local publisher to develop teaching materials for Theatre Workshop, one of the optional subjects in the New Senior Secondary Chinese Language Studies syllabus to be introduced in September 2009.

Outbound exposures

As a result of financial support from the government and more business sponsorship opportunities since Hong Kong Rep’s incorporation in April 2001, the company has been able to make more frequent outbound cultural exchange tours, and establish an international profile abroad. Examples are touring of its original musical Sweet and Sour Hong Kong (a morale-boosting project to help re-launch Hong Kong’s economy in the post-SARS period in 2003) to Hangzhou and Shanghai, and a cultural ambassador tour to Toronto, New York and Beijing with Love in a Fallen City in 2005. The company’s reputation was further cultivated with its revisits to Beijing with Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land and De Ling and Empress Dowager Cixi in the summer of 2007 and 2008 respectively. The latter was an event to coincide with the 2008 Beijing Olympic Cultural Festival held at the newly opened National Centre for Performing Arts opposite the Forbidden City.
4. The development of theatre venues for the community

Hong Kong’s cultural development is a unique blend of the fine traditions of both East and West – a characteristic unparalleled in any other metropolis in the world. The government, through the Home Affairs Bureau, plays a major role in ensuring this uniqueness and enriching Hong Kong people’s lifestyle by providing not only proper theatres and concert halls but also varied cultural and arts programs.

Hong Kong City Hall
Built in 1962 in the center of Hong Kong Island, the Hong Kong City Hall is one of the principal venues for many world-renowned artists, and has provided budding young artists with a platform to professionalism in the performing arts. It has therefore contributed to ridding Hong Kong of the uninviting label of ‘cultural desert’.

Hong Kong Cultural Centre
The promotion and development of performing arts took a big step forward with the opening of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre in 1989 on the original site of the Kowloon Canton Railway Terminal across Victoria Harbour. It provides a world-class performance venue for renowned overseas performers, and its facilities are extremely popular, facing great demand from the arts community and arts presenters.

Community arts centres
The government’s provision of performance venues has also branched out to various urban and rural districts with the building of a number of Town Halls (equipped with 1,400 seat auditoria), purpose-built theatres (equipped with 900 seat auditoria) and Community Arts Centres (equipped with 400 seat theatres). These venues are suitable for different scales and varied types of cultural and entertainment programs. A wide range of community activities from drama, dance, music, exhibition, handicraft and lectures are organised and specially designed to cater for grass roots participants in the regions.

Hong Kong Arts Centre
Built in 1979 and managed by a Board of Trustees, the 19-storey Hong Kong Arts Centre, provides a home for resident arts groups and cultural organisations, e.g. the Goethe Institute and the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society, and the PIP Art Education for Children, to nurture creativity, visual and contemporary performing arts, as well as film and video arts. It also operates an arts school to provide lifelong and life-wide arts education to the public.

Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts
The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts was built in 1984, with an objective of developing the best institution of its kind in the world. The Academy’s state-of-the-art facilities and its six disciplines of Dance, Drama, Film and Television, Music, Theatre and Entertainment Arts, and Chinese Traditional Theatre, provide ample opportunities for Bachelor and Master degree students to pursue cutting edge and cross-disciplinary work. The Academy’s Lyric Theatre and Drama Theatre are open for booking by the community for cultural events.
5. Support of the arts and arts education in Hong Kong

Major performing arts groups are important cultural assets and their performances reflect the state of arts development in Hong Kong. Over the past four decades, the well-established major arts companies that have contributed towards shaping the cultural scene of Hong Kong have received funding directly from the Government, while a number of others are supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in the form of three year grants, one year grants, project grants, emerging artists grants, cultural exchange grants and other grant categories that have evolved to address the changing needs of the arts community.

Public funding for the arts

Government funding covers the major arts companies’ production and program costs, employment of artists, staff and administration overheads. Public funding support for major performing arts groups amounts to a total of HKD230 million (USD30M). The overall effectiveness of the funding provided to major performance groups are judged by each individual groups’ artistic ‘output’ and ‘impact’ on the community, and take into account the tangible and intangible results, such as audience building and sponsorship, the effects on other sectors of the community and the international image of Hong Kong.

Apart from these major arts groups, the Government has spent HKD161 million (USD21M) a year to support small- and medium-sized performing arts groups and artists. Five hundred local artists/arts groups are given performing opportunities.

Other funding sources

Another form of support to performing arts groups or individual budding artists with potential is provided by consulate generals, international cultural institutions, district cultural organisations, arts festivals, associations or federations of individual art forms, as well as the Quality Education Fund, private foundations, corporations and individuals. These activities contribute to the pluralistic nature of the performing arts scene, allowing young talent a chance to showcase their creativity, enlarging the audience base of various arts programs, and strengthening community involvement in arts development.

To increase the accessibility of the performing arts to the community, promote arts appreciation, and to stimulate creativity, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department puts much effort into partnering with local arts groups and artists to organise intensive outreach programs and arts education activities at schools and in the community through various activities: Community Cultural Ambassador Scheme, Program Partnership Scheme, School Cultural Day Scheme, District Cantonese Opera Parade and the Venue Partnership Scheme. The latest one aims at establishing and developing the artistic image of venues concerned.

Arts Education

School education is regarded as an important means to provide students with knowledge, skills, positive values and attitude necessary for cultivating the cultural and aesthetic qualities. Clearly, the better the educational results, the better for Hong Kong. These education programmes also help develop interests and expertise that are useful for students wishing to pursue a career in culture and the arts. Supporting measures such as the provision of financial resources, curriculum resources, and professional development programmes and projects, are regularly provided to schools and teachers by the Education Bureau.
**Curriculum reform**

Building on arts learning in basic education, the New Senior Secondary curriculum will be launched in the 2009 school year spearheaded by the Education Bureau, providing all students with more diversified pathways to continue their pursuit in the arts. These include the provision of independent enquiry study in liberal studies for students to select ‘arts’ as a theme for exploration from multiple perspectives. The Bureau also allocates grants to schools as operating expenses for their flexible organisation of various activities, such as the ‘artist-in-school’ program, to broaden students’ exposure to the arts and enhance their arts ability.

**Quality Education Fund**

The Quality Education Fund was established in 1998 with a capital of HKD5 billion (USD641M) to support community initiatives and projects for the promotion of all-round quality education in Hong Kong. Many of these projects also provide training opportunities to enhance teachers’ professional knowledge in the arts and culture as well as enhance the sustainability of arts and culture education in schools. ‘Creative Arts Education’, ‘Effective Learning’, ‘National Education’, ‘Healthy Campus’ and ‘Supporting Youth Development’ have been newly introduced as priority themes for QEF applications in 2008 to proactively respond to society’s expectations in the promotion of national education, creativity education and healthy growth of the younger generation.

**Arts-related programs at tertiary education**

In anticipation of the rapid development of the arts and creative industries, and taking into account the Government’s advice on manpower requirements for specific sectors and professions, community needs, and institutional capacity, some tertiary education institutions have established or expanded programs related to the arts. For example, the Hong Kong Baptist University has launched a Master of Visual Arts (MVA) in Art Administration in 2008.

Initiated by the Hong Kong Baptist University and endorsed by the Government, a factory estate in Shek Kip Mei in the Shum Shui Po District, Kowloon has been converted into a creative arts centre. It opened its doors in the fall of 2008. This centre provides studio space for 100 individual arts workers, space for rental by institutional tenants, space for commercial tenants operating cafes or arts supplies, three galleries and one black box theatre.

Strengthening the software and humanware for culture and the arts in Hong Kong has been the prevailing policy of the Legislation Council’s Panel on Home Affairs. The policy is in line with the core values of Hong Kong as a free, diversified and open society. The lawmakers are exploring new and alternative art spaces in the community to enable the arts to take stronger roots in the community.

**6. The West Kowloon Cultural District- A new initiative for Hong Kong’s arts industry**

The Chief Executive of Hong Kong in his 2008/09 Policy Address promised to enhance Hong Kong’s arts software by promoting cultural activities in the community and tapping into cultural consumption markets, encouraging cultural and performing arts groups to stage performances across the territory, and encouraging tertiary institutions and professional arts groups to nurture intermediaries for arts services and to develop a broad audience base.

These policies are to tie in with the entrepreneurial development of a prime waterfront site of about forty hectares at the southern portion of the West Kowloon Reclamation.
This development will be a cultural hub for the community, at an initial investment of HKD21.6 billion (USD2.8 billion) from the public coffers, to start the first phase construction of infrastructure and theatre facilities. It is the Government’s long-term investment in the arts for the Hong Kong community.

Phase I of this project is planned to be completed by 2015, and by that time, the additional 24,400 seats will largely relieve the demand on existing performing venues. To cater for sustainable growth of the District, spaces will be reserved for resident companies, small- and medium-sized arts groups and arts education venues. More theatre facilities are proposed in Phase II of the development, and the implementation of it is subject to prevailing market forces; target completion date is 2031.

The entrepreneurial West Kowloon Cultural District project will stimulate new courses in cultural pursuits thanks to the fifteen additional new performance venues, museums and other facilities therein, and it will definitely help realise the vision of developing Hong Kong into a world-class arts and cultural destination.

A comprehensive plan for grooming of future artistic talents, enhancement of quality programs, and development of a young and sophisticated audience will be vital tasks for policy-makers, educational institutions, arts industries, commercial sectors, and local and international corporate enterprises.

To capitalise on the opportunities created by the West Kowloon Cultural District project, to revitalise the old districts in West Kowloon, and to spin off the project’s economic benefits to its neighbouring areas through complementary measures, will be the prime concerns of the community.

**Conclusion**

Hong Kong’s culture is a component of Chinese culture; people living in the city have gradually acknowledged their Chinese identity since the territory’s reunification with Mainland China in 1997.

As a British colony from the latter half of 19th century, Hong Kong has long been exposed to Western civilisation. It will continue to draw on the essence of other cultures to develop the city into an international cultural metropolis known for its openness and pluralism.

Creative industries can play an important role in Hong Kong’s future economic development, and the principles of ‘people-oriented’, ‘partnership’ and ‘community – driven’ in the planning and development of the West Kowloon Cultural District project will be emphasised.
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