Arts and culture without policy: Spontaneous initiatives by non-governmental and civil society groups in Hong Kong

Abstract

Positive non-interventionism was the economic policy of the British colonial government, and a similarly laissez-faire cultural policy governed the development of the arts and cultural sector in Hong Kong. Policy-informed cultural governance emerged after the handover of Hong Kong to China, centralizing power over cultural governance and advocating the use of arts and culture to strengthen citizens' sense of belonging to their homeland. Approaches including new public management and creative industries have been introduced that instrumentalize culture for economic and governance purposes; at the same time the government began to withdraw financial support and attention from local arts and culture. While government policies have been limited to macro-level management and economic contribution, the non-government sector and broader civil society have spontaneously proposed arts and cultural initiatives to meet citizens' needs for leisure, enjoyment, and cultural experiences. Such initiatives are unbounded by any conventional frameworks of policy studies, or by arts education curricula, and seek to develop a multimodal and distributed network to sustain the bottom-up development of local arts and culture. This paper examines the contextual backdrop of the arts and culture ecosystem in Hong Kong civil society, and how spontaneous initiatives by non-governmental and civil society groups are possible without top-down policy and planning.

Arts and cultural policy in Hong Kong

At the beginning of the colonial period, which started in 1842, a cultural policy of "no cultural policy" was imposed by the British colonial government, in keeping with its general laissez faire policy approach (Ooi, 1995). In the late nineteenth century, the government adopted an "arm's length principle" inherited from England to guide cultural governance in response to the increasing demands of citizens for leisure and cultural enjoyment resulting from economic growth and rising living standards (Chen, 2008). Passive cultural governance mechanisms, such as the entrustment and execution of public organizations, responsive funding and venue support through consultation, were implemented as an indirect management approach by the colonial government under a "reactive arts policy" (Ho, 2017). Quasi-autonomous governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as the Urban Council and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), were established as middlemen through which the government could oversee arts affairs and implement short-term measures for the development of arts and culture in the city.

After the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government took an active, hands-on and centralized role in formulating arts and cultural policies, which went beyond the provision of infrastructures as practiced by the colonial government. This included the disbanding of the publicly elected Urban Council and its replacement with the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), operating as part of central government, the formation of a Culture and Heritage Commission (CHC) to advise on cultural policy and funding priorities, and investment in large-scale infrastructure, in particular the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) cultural hub. Early policy addresses defined Hong Kong culture in association with that of China to enhance citizens' sense of belonging to their homeland (e.g., HKSAR Government, 1997, 1999), which marked the instrumentalization of arts and cultural policies to serve the authorities' political agenda.

The commodification of arts and cultural policies emerged around the same time as the handover and the series of financial crises that occurred just before and just after the turn of the millennium. Perhaps in response to financial needs and emerging global trends in governance, the HKSAR government introduced neo-liberalist approaches, such as new public management (NPM) and a centralized market orientation, for the governance of the arts and cultural sectors, and proposed the formation of "creative industries" intended to mix and manipulate culture and creativity for economic purposes (Chen, 2017). However, despite some infrastructural and educational support from the HKSAR government (Whitbread & Leung, 2019), no long-term view on the development of arts and culture in Hong Kong has been envisioned, while the related public policies have been segregated and their objectives and responsibilities fragmented (Leong, 2013).

Increasing public demand for arts and culture and the growing complexity of cultural governance structures have led to the consensus in the arts and cultural sector that a Cultural Affairs Bureau would be an effective body to formulate, centralize and apply arts and cultural policies with a unified vision (Forster, 2015). However, practitioners and the general public have lost trust and hope in the ability of the HKSAR government to lead the development of the arts and cultural sector, because its policymaking mirrors that of mainland China in seeking to centralize control of the arts for the promotion of state

ideology (Luk, 2000). At the same time, the HKSAR government has also begun to withdraw direct financial subsidies to frontline artists and practitioners as part of the neo-liberalist governance approach, which has created a sense of insecurity over their financial dependence on the government (Lee, Chan, Chan, Cheung, Lam & Lam, 2013). This perhaps explains why the proposed establishment of a Cultural Affairs Bureau by the Chief Executive was not well supported in cultural and arts circles, who are concerned about the paternalistic and authoritative style of governance being practiced by the HKSAR government (Ho, 2017). However, without relying on government leadership, the nongovernmental sector and broader civil society have spontaneously launched arts and cultural initiatives to meet citizens' needs for leisure, enjoyment and cultural experiences. Such initiatives are unbounded by conventional frameworks of policy studies and arts education curricula, and seek to develop a multimodal and distributed network to sustain the bottom-up development of local arts and culture.

Spontaneous arts and cultural initiatives by non-government and civil society groups

The sphere of non-governmental bodies that contribute to arts and culture development comprises a wide spectrum of private organizations from various domains, including charity institutions, trust fund foundations from the banking and business sectors, individuals and independent organizations. The relationship between these entities and government-affiliated bodies is not one of conflict; instead they rely on each other to compensate for their weaknesses and limitations and combine their efforts for the sustainable development of arts and culture (Baron, 1997). For example, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust (hereafter, "the Trust") set up the Hong Kong Jockey Club Music and Dance Fund (hereafter, "the Fund") in 1979, to be governed by a board of independent trustees and governmental representatives. The internal policies of the Fund were set by the Cultural Services Branch of the Broadcasting, Culture and Sport Bureau during the colonial period, and later by the LCSD after the handover, with the latter body also providing administrative support and clerical assistance for the daily operation of the Fund.

The Hong Kong Jockey Club is a non-profit organization that has provided gambling services in Hong Kong since 1884, and is the largest taxpayer and community benefactor in the region. It holds a government-granted monopoly for the provision of gambling services and operates independently through a membership structure. Through the Fund, the Trust provides macro- and micro-level funding support to the local arts scene, including infrastructure, such as the building costs of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA), sponsorship of major arts and cultural events, and hundreds of scholarships for elite young musicianship and dancers to further their studies. Other charity foundations and trusts from the private sector that provide considerable donations or are dedicated to the development of the arts and cultural sectors include the Hongkong Bank Foundation, the Swire Group Charitable Trust, and the K11 Art Foundation. However, the private sector only contributes a small portion of the overall funding of the arts compared to other countries, as citizens' sense of honor in their home culture and notions of corporate social responsibility have yet to be fully established in Hong Kong (Chen, 2008).

Although the HKSAR government allocates billions of dollars to the arts and cultural sectors, around three quarters of this funding goes to nine major performing arts groups¹; the rest is distributed among small and medium-sized arts organizations and individual artists through the HKADC (Ho, 2015). Without sufficient financial support from the government to cover their high operating costs, the majority of operators in the arts and cultural sectors have to raise funds from non-government sources. It is not uncommon for arts organizations to have multiple patrons or project-based title sponsorship to sustain their daily operations and the cost of holding events. Apart from private sector benefactors, other common types of non-governmental funding sources include family foundations, charities and non-profit organizations, district councils and donations from individual art lovers.

Recent advancements in information and communication technology have introduced crowdfunding over the Internet as an emerging trend in fundraising, which offers a new approach for arts and cultural sectors to seek financial support from civil society. Early successful crowdfunding platforms include MusicBee, launched in 2015, which focused on fundraising for independent Cantopop music from Hong Kong. Working in a similar way to other crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter, the general public could "back" a campaign proposed by independent artists and be rewarded once the campaign reached its target amount. Rewards could take various forms, such as concert tickets, physical music products, merchandise, or nothing, the latter being equivalent to a donation. In response to the recent coronavirus pandemic, more than 60 local arts organizations co-launched ART Power HK, a crowdfunding project that makes a virtual platform available for local arts events to take place within the online community (Ng, 2020). Using the question "How much is the arts worth to you?" as its fundraising theme, the project addresses the longstanding problem of the sustainability of arts and cultural development in Hong Kong. While the project is currently a one-off kickstarting initiative, it demonstrates the potential of online crowdfunding as a sustainable way forward for arts and cultural development that does not rely on government funding.

Towards a sustainable future

This paper examines the contextual backdrop of the arts and cultural ecosystem in Hong Kong, and how the spontaneous initiatives of non-governmental and civil society groups can be successful without top-down policy and governance. As arts and cultural policies have been instrumentalized and commodified to serve economic and patriotic purposes, an ecosystem that is more financially independent from the government could ensure that artists and practitioners are able to innovate beyond the comfort zone of the conservative bureaucracy and free of the political agenda of the authorities (Chen, 2008). However, merely relying on either efforts from within the industry or top-down governance from the government is insufficient to sustain the arts and cultural sector. For a sustainable and secure future, governments, the private sector, civil society and practitioners need to work together to synergize their efforts and compensate for their individual weaknesses and limitations (UNESCO, 2017).

¹ These include the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, Hong Kong Ballet, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, Hong Kong Dance Company, Hong Kong Sinfonietta, City Contemporary Dance Company, Chung Ying Theatre Company and Zuni Icosahedron

As Forster (2015) has argued, the current short-sighted mentality of the government means that having no official institution at all would be better than the one that is in place; nonetheless, a set of concrete arts and cultural policies would be beneficial to guide the development of the cultural ecosystem. Instead of concentrating only on building large-scale infrastructure, filling seats in theatres, developing eye-catching marketing plans, subsidizing large-scale cultural events and arts festivals, celebrating high culture, and training professional arts administrators for those purposes, the government should also formulate long-term arts and cultural policies for the ecosystem to endure. These include trust-building between the government and the creative industries, the nurturing of citizens' cultural literacy alongside quality audience building, the achievement of a high-standard arts education curriculum, and the development of social relationships and networks within the arts and cultural sector (Kong, 2005; Leong, 2013; Whitbread & Leung, 2019). To develop an enduring arts and cultural ecosystem, a juxtaposition is needed between farsighted policymaking from the top down and spontaneous civil society initiatives from the bottom up.

References

- Baron, B. F. (1997). Funding civil society in Asia: Philanthropy and public-private partnerships (The Asia Foundation Working Paper No. 3). The Asia Foundation.
- Chen, W. (2017). 文化在香港-香港的文化政策(中卷)(Culture in Hong Kong: Hong Kong Cultural Policy (Vol. 2)). Arcadia Press.
- Chen, W. (2008). 香港有文化 香港的文化政策(上卷)(Hong Kong's Culture: Hong Kong Cultural Policy (Vol. 1)). Arcadia Press.
- Gray, C. (2007). Commodification and instrumentality in cultural policy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *13*(2), 203–215. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10286630701342899
- Forster, J. K. (2015). *Can Hong Kong do without a Cultural Bureau?* [Unpublished master's thesis]. The University of Hong Kong. http://hdl.handle.net/10722/246709
- Ho, H-Y. O. (2015). Growing into failure: The Hong Kong Arts Development Council. In J. Caust (Ed.), *Arts and cultural leadership in Asia* (pp. 39–47). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746739
- Ho, L. (2017). From 'no cultural policy' to 'centralised market orientation': The political economy of Hong Kong cultural policy. (1997–2015). *Global Media and China, 2*(1), 57 –73. https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436417693007
- HKSAR Government. (1997). *The 1997 policy address*. https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/pa97/
- HKSAR Government. (1999). *The 1999 policy address*. https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/pa99/
- Kong, L. (2005). The sociality of cultural industries: Hong Kong's cultural policy and film industry. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *11*(1), 61–76. https://doi.org/10.0180/10286630500067812
- Luk, Y. T. (2000). Postcolonial culture policy in Hong Kong. Media International Australia. *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, 94*(1), 147–155. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0009400114
- Ng, E. W. (2020). News. ArtAsiaPacific, 118, 14-15.
- Ooi, V. (1995). The best cultural policy is no cultural policy: Cultural policy in Hong Kong. *The European Journal of Cultural Policy, 1,* 273–287.
- Lee, E. W. Y., Chan, E. Y. M., Chan, J. C. W., Cheung, P. T. Y., Lam, W. F., & Lam, W.-M. (2013). *Public policymaking in Hong Kong: Civic engagement and state-society relations in a semi-democracy*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203066492
- Leong, S. (2013). Cultural policy and the development of local cultures in Hong Kong. In S. Leong, & B. W. Leung (Eds.), Creative arts in education and culture: Perspectives from greater China (pp. 27–39). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7729-33
- UNESCO. (2017). Education for sustainable development goals: Learning objectives. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/
- Whitbread, R. G., & Leung, B. W. (2019). Cultural diversity in Hong Kong arts education: From policy to practice and research. In C. H. Lum & E. Wagner (Eds.), Arts education and cultural diversity: Policies, research, practices and critical perspectives (pp. 37–50). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8004-4_5