

THE INK SOCIETY
Submission to the
Legislative Council Subcommittee on West Kowloon Cultural District
Friday 4 January 2008

The Ink Society was first invited to present our views to Legco in May 2005 on the original West Kowloon Cultural District (“WKCD”) “invitation for proposal”. At that time, we emphasized the importance of GOVERNANCE. We proposed the establishment of a statutory body as an essential component of the governance system. We have made the same recommendation repeatedly in different public forums as well as in our position paper which is available online at www.inksociety.org. We are therefore particularly excited to see that Government is now going in that direction.

Today’s session is focused on the proposed West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (“The Authority”) so we will touch on several important issues related to the Authority.

Land: we fully support Government’s decision to take the commercial land component out of the purview of the Authority. This erases the concern that property developers would be involved in the operation of public cultural institutions. Furthermore, the Authority can now focus on the arts and culture aspects without worrying about land development of such enormous magnitude.

WKCD composition: the Authority should be comprised of public officers and individuals in their *personal capacity*. WKCD is bigger than any one organization and members of the Authority should be fully dedicated to the big picture. If a member represents one particular organization, then he is obviously obligated to act for that organization which in turn compromises his ability to address the needs of the overall community.

We do not support an election process of Authority members for that would politicize the organization and create factions with loyalty to different groups of voting constituents. A transparent and open system of appointment based on fair and reasonable guidelines is the most practicable option.

In addition to the Authority itself, there will be numerous other boards, committees and scores of full time professionals involved at all levels of operation. This includes academic advisors, boards of trustees, museum curators and directors, venue management professionals and so on. It is important that the Authority invite the best and most qualified candidates regardless of their nationality. Hong Kong must embrace the top international talent in order to make WKCD a success in the world arena.

Funding: in principle, we support an upfront endowment rather than a staggered disbursement process subject to approval at each stage. Having said so, there needs to be a high degree of transparency and monitoring. The Authority should be subject to independent audits and report regularly to Government.

Having to apply for funding frequently would hamper the Authority's ability to make long term plans. For example, if the Authority is in negotiations with a major overseas Museum partner for M+, then the overseas partner would want to be certain that there is no funding obstacle or delay before they agree to make a long term contractual commitment.

Public Expenditure and Government involvement: as a result of Hong Kong's land policy, tax system and other factors, it is necessary for Government to commit substantial public funds to develop arts and culture. Without public funding, virtually every single major performing arts group and museum will cease to exist. However, *funding is different to operation.*

If Government had planned to run the entire WKCD, they could simply establish a new bureau or department and everyone involved from top to bottom will be a civil servant. Instead, Government is setting up an independent WKCD Authority precisely because it understands Government should *not* be in the business of running the arts and culture industry. Government correctly sees its role as the "enabler" by providing the funding and legal and physical infrastructure upon which the private sector can build. To that end, the Authority must involve the private sector as much as possible and ensure that the numerous different organizations within the WKCD are all run by independent boards and professionals in an environment that is free from political interference.

Education and Community Outreach: Government should include in the Authority's terms of reference a requirement to use a small portion of the funding for education and community outreach purposes. WKCD isn't just about showcasing Hong Kong as Asia's World City to the international community. WKCD is also about enriching the lives of the Hong Kong people, including our children and the grass root communities. There are countless numbers of ways the Authority can support education and community outreach. For example, they could sponsor transportation for school children to see important exhibitions, or they could arrange master classes in the community town halls when a major performing arts group visits, or organize fringe events and mini festivals in the outlying areas etc. etc..

It may be a little disproportionate and bureaucratic to add a specific clause of this nature at this level of governance. But a requirement in the Authority's terms of reference will serve as a constant reminder at the highest level that WKCD is there for everyone in Hong Kong, no matter where they live or how much they earn.