

THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG 香港大學
PUBLIC OPINION PROGRAMME 民意研究計劃



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27 October 2005

Miss Odelia Leung
 Clerk to Subcommittee on West Kowloon Cultural District Development
 Legislative Council
 Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
 People's Republic of China
 (by email to cshiu@legco.gov.hk)

Dear Miss Leung,

Subcommittee on West Kowloon Cultural District Development

Your letter of 17 October 2005 refers. Thank you for inviting me to comment on the public consultation exercise conducted by the Administration in relation to the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) Project, and its report of public consultation.

Declaration of interests

Before giving my comments, I feel obliged to declare my vested interests (or rather, their lack of) in this WKCD Project. Being head of the Public Opinion Programme (POP) at the University of Hong Kong, I had been engaged in two research projects related to WKCD:

1. After organizing five consultation forums on WKCD in October and November 2003, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (ADC) conducted a questionnaire survey from 9 to 27 February 2004 to collect public opinion on WKCD. The questionnaire was printed on Sing Tao Daily on 9 February 2004, and readers were requested to return them to ADC. POP was commissioned by ADC to process the returned questionnaires. The survey report dated March 2004 can be downloaded from http://www.hkadc.org.hk/wkcd/surveyresults-dr_en.htm.
2. In September 2004, the Sino Group, which subsequently became a member of the Sunny Development Limited which is one of the three screened-in Proponents of WKCD, commissioned POP to conduct an independent opinion survey on Hong Kong people's habit of using the cultural facilities, their satisfaction with cultural development in Hong Kong, and their opinions on the WKCD project. The survey was released in November 2004, its full report can be downloaded from the HKU POP Site at <http://hkupop.hku.hk>.

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Other than these two projects, I cannot recall any other involvement in collecting public opinions on WKCD. I especially like to point out that (1) the second project mentioned above was not related to any preference of Proponents or designs, and (2) POP did not submit any bid for the Administration's consultancy services in connection to the WKCD public consultation exercise mentioned in the government press release of 11 January 2005, a copy of which can be downloaded from <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200501/11/0111252.htm>.

Academic independence

It is now public knowledge that the Administration has commissioned the Public Policy Research Institute (PPRI) of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University to conduct the consultancy study on the WKCD project. The *modus operandi* of PPRI as explained in Paragraph 1.9 of its consultancy report was as follows:

The Public Policy Research Institute operates with total academic independence and is not connected with any other academic unit in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. On completing the Consultancy, the PPRI submitted its Report to Government without reference to any unit or committee in the University.

All members of the PPRI declared that they had no conflict of interests in performing this consultancy service.

The analyses, findings, and interpretation of the findings contained in this Report reflect the views of the PPRI, and do not necessarily reflect those of the University or Government.

As an academic researcher myself, I welcome PPRI's explicit elaboration of its academic independence *vis-à-vis* other academic units, and presumably its complete autonomy in processing the data and compiling the report. This is an advancement in consultancy work, which nicely echoes what a government spokesman was quoted as saying on 11 January 2005: "We believe that engaging an independent academic research institute will enhance the credibility of the analysis and raise public confidence in the [West Kowloon Cultural District] consultation exercise." (see <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200501/11/0111252.htm>).

Nevertheless, having read through the report, I am still not sure who was responsible for designing the most important instruments of the consultation exercise, namely, the content and layout of the Comment Cards, and the content and structure of the questionnaires used in the telephone surveys. We all understand that there are limitations to every scientific instrument, but the question here is how much limitation has been preset by the Administration in its tender documents, and how much

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academic freedom *de facto* did PPRI enjoy in conducting its studies.

These questions are not meant to discredit PPRI or the Administration. Quite on the contrary, I think PPRI has done a good job in processing the data and compiling its report. My questions are meant to enhance the public's understanding of the academic freedom and independence involved in this consultancy study. POP, for example, does not bid for government projects which do not allow POP to have the final say in designing a research.

On behalf of the general public, Lego members may consider asking the Administration for a copy of the original tender, and assess how much independence PPRI actually had in carrying out its study.

Problems illustrated

I do not want to go into the details of the consultancy report. I would simply discuss Paragraphs 6.5 and 6.6 of the report to bring out the problems and limitations which PPRI might have faced. The two paragraphs read as follows -

Among those who express an opinion on the issue of the Single-package Development approach, the majority are against it.

Findings on public opinion on the Canopy are inconclusive. The majority like the Canopy as a landmark. Nevertheless, there exists a considerable body of negative opinions on the Canopy, as manifested in the written submissions and relevant meeting records, and results of surveys by other organizations.

The conclusion on the Single-package Development approach has apparently been drawn from the findings of telephone surveys, echoed by views expressed in “close-ended questions on the Comment Cards, written submissions by individuals and organizations, records of meetings...” (see Paragraph 5.6, but the expression “closed-ended questions on the Comment Cards” was changed to “open-ended questions on the Comment Cards” in the Executive Summary when discussing the same issue, so I suspect the expression “closed-ended questions” in Paragraph 5.6 was a typographical mistake.) A close examination of the design of the Comment Cards shows that the question of Single-package Development was not asked in the main body of the Comment Cards. Neither was there any direct question on whether there should be a Canopy. These probably reflected the Administration's mindset at the time of designing the Comment Cards.

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With this background in mind, it is interesting to note how the Report came to its conclusion regarding the Canopy. Paragraph 5.5 said -

The Telephone Polls show that 50.9% of the respondents like the idea of having the Canopy as the landmark for Hong Kong... From the close-ended part of the Comment Cards, 27.9% indicate that they do not like any of the three proposals regarding the Canopy by not ticking any of the choices... However, from the open-ended part of the Comment Cards, 57.7% of the written comments under “Any Other Comments” (Question 7) on the Canopy are negative comments... As for written submissions [practically all categories of submissions were not in favour of it]... Surveys by other organizations also produce a wide range of results... The above shows that views or evidence from different sources do not entirely converge.... The findings can only be described as inconclusive.

It seems that the report’s conclusion that public views on the Canopy was “inconclusive” was mainly based on the apparent inconsistency between telephone poll findings (that most respondents “liked the idea”) and opinions collected via other channels. Table 4.8 of the report, however, shows that only 22.7% of telephone poll respondents could correctly answered the question regarding the number of screened-in proposals, while Table 4.15 shows that 84.1% of the respondents “did not have any preference or an opinion” on which canopy design they favoured. Such a high level of no preference, coupled with the fact that the 50.9% who liked the idea of having the Canopy was actually responding to the question which said “The Canopy design comes from the winner of an international competition. Do you like having the canopy as the landmark for Hong Kong?” I wonder what the result would be like if the question used was simply “Do you like having the canopy as the landmark for Hong Kong?” It might have changed the Report’s conclusion on the Canopy.

Given that PPRI has declared its academic independence in Paragraph 1.9 of the report, it would be nice to know who is responsible for designing this question, and the rationale behind this design. The answer to this question would probably help to solve a lot of mysteries surrounding the design of the questionnaires and the Comment Cards, especially on the question of why some options, like for or against single-package development and for or against a canopy, are only available in the telephone survey but not the Comment Cards.

Some suggestions

I am not challenging the professionalism of HKSARG or PPRI in commissioning and conducting this consultancy. It has been a general practice for such a long time that “independent consultants” may not be given as much freedom as they might have wanted. I do not have any evidence to prove or disprove this proposition for this particular case, nor do I think any practicing pollster should be entrusted with the responsibility to prove or disprove the case.

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In the short run, it would help to increase the credibility of all government consultancy studies if the Administration could release the full content of relevant tender documents whenever it releases a consultancy report. In the long run, the research profession itself should set up its own code of conduct and practices in order to protect its own independence. In the very long run, new monitoring mechanisms, like councils of researchers and data auditing firms, should be set up to censor sub-standard consultancy studies.

Finally, I have one minor suggestion on the release of survey findings. I do not quite agree with the Administration's anonymising the name of the Proponents (with "X", "Y" and "Z") in its reports. I do not see any issue of privacy or injustice involved in disclosing actual names, provided that every part of the study has been conducted properly. Moreover, whatever the original purpose of the Administration in anonymising the Proponents, it was completely defeated by Paragraph 5.3 of the report, the last part of which said: "A survey by another organization indicates that WCCP is most preferred on six aspects of the proposal, while DSI is most preferred on three aspects, and SD is most preferred on one aspect." Either that other survey was unprofessional and therefore should not be cited, or that it was professionally done (in the view of PPRI) and hence matches the results of PPR's own surveys. The mentioning of that other survey must have erred in one way or another.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Chung
Director of Public Opinion Programme
The University of Hong Kong

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