

A Brief Comment on Cultural Software

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Introduction

The launching of the West Kowloon Cultural District project has generated much discussion over the needs for 'cultural software' to support this ambitious project. With increased investment in arts and culture, there is definitely urgency in nurturing of cultural software. This paper attempts to identify areas of 'cultural software' that require immediate support, and discuss some of the problems and suggest possible solutions.

Definition

Cultural 'software' could generally refer to all human involvement and affiliated support in the production, mediation and consumption of arts and culture. Key areas it covers include:

1. Production: training of artists and production of art works.
2. Mediation: training and professional practice of the mediation of arts, including professionals in cultural management, research, criticism and education; supplementary support such as media channel, library and archive, teaching material, are essential.
3. Consumption: audience development, including nurturing collectors and sponsors.

Because it covers such board areas, it is important to identify areas that require most urgent support.

Local Needs

While it is important to look at the cultural ecology in its totality and give a balanced support to the various types of 'software', the training of software in 'mediation' and 'consumption' are particularly weak in Hong Kong and they deserve special attention and support.

With the launching of West Kowloon Cultural District Project, the needs for

‘mediation software’ such as professionals in cultural management and educators/critics for the nurturing of audience and cultivating potential sponsors become increasingly urgent.

Difficulties

Public indifference

In general, the community is still relatively indifferent to arts and culture. While it is easy to blame the public for their indifference, it is important also to recognize the failure of the arts community in making arts approachable to the public.

Lacks qualified teachers

Since 1997, there has been a serious brain drain situation emerged in the local arts scene. Many senior cultural management professionals moved inland China or to Macau. The lack of professionals to help training new ‘software’ has been a prominent problem. While there appears to be an increased interest in setting up programmes in cultural management among local tertiary institutions, the lack of professional teachers strongly affect the quality of training programmes offered.

For arts education and criticism, there is also a lack of support (in research, teachers’ training, provision of teaching material that are meaningful within the local cultural context) to help teachers to get adjusted to the increasingly complex needs in arts education.

Lack of practicing opportunities

Even after receiving some formal training in cultural mediation, most of these interested individuals find it difficult to find sizable institutions for them to apply what they have learnt into practice.

Suggested Actions

Understand the ecology

Undertake 1) an ecological review of the local arts scene to identify the gaps, areas of weakness and potential for development; 2) Conduct an audience survey to identify the cultural habits, needs and preferences of Hong Kong people. Information collected will be essential for the planning of nurturing ‘cultural software’

Increase training programmes

Collaborate with tertiary institutions and professional groups to develop various types

of education programme (degree & certificate programmes, workshop, conference, internship, etc.) for new comers and mid-career cultural workers. Programmes inviting overseas experts and sending out locals for overseas internship should be encouraged.

Open up training opportunities

The government should open up its cultural institutions and introduce internship/practicum programmes to provide practicing opportunities for interested outsiders who have already received some forms of training through studies or practical work.

Production of supporting resources

Collaborate with tertiary institutions to encourage research and the production of educational aid such as teaching aids, publications in cultural management and arts appreciation, with an emphasis on enhancing a better understanding of cultural experiences that are meaningful to the Hong Kong people.

Education programme

Direct funding should be provided to encourage cultural organizations to organize of education programme for different sectors of the community, through workshop, community arts programmes, tour, lecture, programme-related educational activities, etc..

Coordinative mechanism

A collaborative mechanism is needed to review the existing cultural ecology, propose polices and strategies, set priorities, liaise with main partners of the arts community in the training of cultural software, and make regular assessment of the implementation of the plan.