

THE INK SOCIETY

Submission to the Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs on “Strengthening the Software and Humanware in Culture and the Arts”

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CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Culture and arts are best developed in an environment that values their activities and achievements.

In the past, culture in Hong Kong has consisted primarily of folk traditions: the celebration of festivals, Cantonese opera, comedies in drama and film, popular entertainment, and a pervasive food culture that includes a large variety of street markets and restaurants. Altogether they formed the fabric of local culture.

The cultural institutions currently being debated about are of a different order. They reflect society’s growing affluence and higher educational levels, globalization and awareness of other cultures and general trends, and the wish to align and update our existing cultural institutions.

These include dance & theatre companies, art museums, community arts programs, societies dedicated to cultural pursuits, and visual & performing arts schools. Their success depends on a significant pool of artistic and creative talent in various fields, highly trained and knowledgeable curatorial and administrative professionals, supported by a discerning and actively participating public. They also require appropriate venues and some degree of external financial support. But how do we strengthen the ‘software’ and ‘humanware’ in this context?

EDUCATION

One of the most effective ways of instilling culture is through education. With the support and commitment from the government, it is possible to enhance the cultural and artistic content in the school curriculum both at the primary and secondary school levels.

Strengthening the Cultural Content in the School Curriculum - By introducing a strong cultural content in the general curriculum beginning with primary school, children would be able to learn about history and context. Through stories about famous people and their accomplishments, important historical events and local history, students would gain a better understanding and perspective of the world, and their own place in it. This could form part of the Chinese language curriculum or that of history and geography. The study of these subjects would be enhanced by projects that require supplemental reading, research, essay writing, presentation, class discussion and analysis.

Literature and Foreign Language Study - Through the study of literature, both in Chinese and in foreign languages, students are exposed to the ideas and language that form

the basis of culture. The use of Mandarin as the medium of teaching Chinese should be considered.

A visual arts program in the schools would involve teaching students about the concepts and production of art using different media, techniques, themes, and knowledge about well-known artists and their works. An emphasis on the creative expression of ideas will help students formulate their own views and ideas about the world and express them in individual ways.

Drama & theatre programs in the schools would encourage students to express themselves through acting out and role-playing, thus gaining insight into themselves as well as other people's lives through characterization and analysis. Students may memorize passages from famous plays and act them out, create their own plays, or take part in larger productions to learn about different aspects of stage production. These activities promote creativity, self-awareness, public speaking skills, and help students gain self-confidence.

Qualified Teachers – The crux of a successful culture and arts curriculum is two-fold: having the overall philosophy and vision, and the people to carry it out. Highly trained and qualified teachers are essential. They may be recruited from local and overseas universities, the Academy of Performing Arts or the Baptist University Visual Arts Academy and given additional teacher training if necessary, or they may be recruited from the Institute of Education.

The primary task of teachers should be teaching and not administrative work. All administrative tasks should be minimized so as to lessen the burden of teachers' responsibilities. The use of teaching assistants can help ease the problem of large classes, and large classes may be broken up into discussion groups when appropriate, although small classes are always preferable. A public awards system for teachers should be in place to recognize excellence in teaching and promote pride in the profession. All these initiatives would require the concerted support of the Education Department to succeed, with a view towards the long-term investment in human potential with far-reaching consequences.

OTHER RESOURCES

Outside of the classroom, the **media** could also play a useful role; television programs with a historical, cultural and artistic content can reach wide audiences. Some of these may be tailored to younger audiences with short daily programs on the origin of 4-character sayings, or biographies of philosophers, emperors, famous men, artists, musicians, can all serve as educational tools with an enriched cultural content. The use of newspaper articles as discussion points for current affairs would be appropriate in secondary schools. Essay writing and analysis should be an essential component of higher level education.

Family support and participation in cultural activities should be encouraged. Regular attendance at concerts and art exhibitions are important supplements to the learning of musical instruments and art classes. Special family discounts and student discounts at these events help provide further incentive.

Community-based cultural activities, such as artists' colonies, local drama productions, amateur choir and theatre groups should be encouraged and can be set up in less privileged communities with the help of existing companies.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, society would benefit greatly from a population which is not only highly qualified and trained in specific skills, but also possessed with a strong sense of its own cultural and individual identity; which is well-informed, open-minded, and well-read; which is resourceful and able to find creative solutions in life and work; and has the confidence to provide leadership in different fields. A strong command of foreign languages, particularly English, and an understanding of other cultures and peoples, will promote greater tolerance for differences. An education steeped in these values would be of great benefit to the development of human potential, not only in culture and the arts, but in society as a whole.