

**Presentation to LegCo Panel on Home Affairs**

**By Vincent Chow, Chairman**

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The purpose of this paper is to present a synopsis of the recent work of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, focussing mainly on three areas: promotion of the arts in schools, cultural exchange and promotion of the arts in the community.

**Major developments of the last two years**

The HKADC has made headway in resolving some longstanding issues and developing many new initiatives. In 1996/97 Council-commissioned projects accounted for only 3% of our budget. The figure has increased to 18% in 1997/98 and is expected to be even higher this year. What it means is that HKADC is making sure that resources are being spent on projects deemed to provide it with the sort of information it needs to further its plans; and that it does want to shed its undeserved image as a mere grant-making machine.

The commissioned review conducted in 1997 of the General Support Grant system, which subvents several major professional groups such as the Hong Kong Ballet, proved to be a significant initiative with far reaching consequences. The system is now being replaced by a set number of 3-year and 1-year grants. Companies must compete for the limited slots; and they must present clear objectives and expectations that will be reviewed annually.

In 1997/98, our Literary Arts Committee launched the Literary Awards; the Visual

Arts Committee offered fellowships; the Music and Dance Company initiated Development Grants for distinguished small dance companies and the Drama and Traditional Performance Committee started multi-project grants which give more secure funding to deserving companies. Thanks to the assistance of the Home Affairs Bureau, premises in some old buildings in Yau Ma Tei have been promised to accommodate artists' studios; and exhibitions will soon be possible at the lobby of the Queensway Government Offices.

Several major research projects were commissioned, including a history of music in Hong Kong, a history of dance in Hong Kong, as well as studies on Arts Policy and Infrastructure for Hong Kong, Allocation of Arts Funding, and Arts and the Media.

Assisted by the HKADC in the selection process, a number of Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices abroad have purchased artworks by Hong Kong artists for display. If this programme can be expanded to more offices, it would give much needed exposure overseas for our artists.

### **Promotion of the arts in schools**

One of the most important projects launched recently was the three-year Artists-in-Schools Pilot Programme. In the last academic year, fourteen secondary schools had been selected to participate in the programme. Artists worked with students and teachers at those schools, giving them the opportunity to experience and understand the creative process firsthand. Though it is too early to evaluate the success of the programme, results of the first year indicated a positive impact on students' creativity, self-confidence, communications skills and ability in independent thinking.

We have funded several projects that brought appreciation of Cantonese operatic performance to schools, and one that helps the establishment of courses in the same area at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts. These projects not only promote the arts in schools, they serve also to heighten awareness of Chinese culture.

In addition, our Arts Education committee has been organizing training courses and forums for teachers and artists, as well as advocating for more support and recognition to arts education. It is our hope that with the introduction of these pilot schemes, the Education Department and the schools eventually will embark on regular programmes on their own.

### **Promotion of the Arts in the community**

All our General Support Grant recipients organised community activities to promote interest in the arts in general and their specific art form in particular. In addition, our Council supports arts promotion activities through project grants to other organizations that contribute to the promotion of the arts in the community.

In order to increase coverage of the arts in the print media, we decided to allocate \$5 million (for the first year) towards the publishing of a multi-disciplinary arts magazine. Proposals were openly invited and eventually the one chosen was that made jointly by the South China Morning Post and the International Association of Theatre Critics. *Xpression*, 打開, has contents in both Chinese and English and is distributed free biweekly with the newspaper. It was launched on 10 September 1998.

Sadly noticing that literature sections in Chinese newspapers are dwindling in number and content, we have recently made sponsorships to several newspapers for them to enhance or enlarge their literature sections.

The Council is so concerned with the conservation and development of Chinese traditional *xi qu* 戲曲, (not only those from Guangdong, but those from other provinces as well) that we have formed a committee to handle the work. Revival of interest in *xi qu* serves to bring both the arts and Chinese culture to the community at large. However, it must be noted that the expectation of this sector of arts practitioners has been so elevated that the resources the Council has been able to provide are seen to be woefully inadequate.

### **International Exchange in the Arts**

The Council supported 84 cultural exchange projects in 1997/98, 47 of which involved Hong Kong artists or groups showcasing their works overseas and 37 brought overseas artists to work with local arts practitioners. Sponsorship of these activities amounted to \$10.6 million.

In assessing cultural exchange projects, the HKADC always asks how each project will benefit the development of the arts in Hong Kong. We are not a programme presenter and we believe that the bringing in of overseas artists to Hong Kong is well served by the two municipal councils, the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society and other private concerns. Therefore, our criterion in supporting visits of overseas artists is

whether and how local artists will benefit from working with them.

When it comes to promoting Hong Kong artists overseas, the Council critically examines what we have to offer and whether a project and its executor have the characteristics and quality which befit the image of Hong Kong. We also adhere to international practices in arts exchange and take the position that our artists be on invitation and that the costs be shared between the host and the Council.

There is a fine line between promoting distinguished Hong Kong artists overseas and promoting Hong Kong overseas through the arts. The latter requires large-scaled and sustained efforts to achieve any respectable results. Under a mandate which makes local arts development its prime concern, and with limited resources, the Council can only focus on the former. I submit that in order to effectively promote Hong Kong overseas through the arts there must be a conscious decision on the part of the Government and of the Legislature leading to an appropriate infrastructure endowed with sufficient resources.

### **Our plea**

I will be the first one to admit that the work done and being done by the HKADC on promotion of the arts in schools and in the community and international exchange are still far from satisfying.

However, our battlefield is long. The number of grant applications continued to increase: 1,369 applications were processed in 1997/98, 30% more than the prior year

in which the number of applications doubled. Committee members and staff often had to work well into the night to process this workload.

We are committed to leave as much money to the arts as possible. We are proud to report that our administrative expenses take up only 10% of our budget, which means that our Secretariat has been kept efficient and hardworking. Yet we cannot reallocate resources to those three areas of arts development without pinching others.

With the creation of the Quality Education Fund, promotion of the arts in schools ought to be taken care of, and we shall monitor the situation closely. In the case of promotion of the arts in the community and of arts exchange, I have written to the Chief Secretary to explain that the Council needs more funding to further these aims.

This is not to belittle the increase in our funding from Government over the past few years. It is just that the total resources put to our disposal is far less than what we need to implement enough of our Five-Year Plan to satisfy the public's expectation, which has indeed been rising since the founding of the Council and especially so after the Reunification.

We realise that request for funding increase for the arts may not be in tune with the present economic climate. However, it is widely accepted that the arts nurture creativity, the pursuit of excellence and independent thinking. The arts therefore have a major role to play in enhancing the quality and the competitiveness of our citizens. In addition, a vibrant arts scene is crucial to making Hong Kong the "City of Life" in attracting tourists.

But as I have said before, adequate funding is not the only key to the problem of promoting Hong Kong through the arts. One still needs the governmental infrastructure. Our thinking has been reflected in our submission to Government in response to the Review of District Administration. That being a separate and formidable topic, suffice it to say here that some fundamental changes should be executed soon. Otherwise, Hong Kong may lag behind those neighbours that have recognised the arts as a crucial tool for developing the potential of their people and enhancing their global image and have invested accordingly.