

**Presentation by the
International Association of Art Critics Hong Kong (AICAHK)
to the
Legislative Council Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting
on the
"Review of the Control of Obscene and Indecent Articles Ordinance (Cap. 390)"
Wednesday, 21 January 2009**

Presented by John Batten, Member of AICAHK & Editor of AICAHK website

Other delegations to today's Panel may speak about the details in the Administration's discussion paper. The International Association of Art Critics in Hong Kong wishes to emphasize the importance of points 15 & 16 in the Administration's Paper:

"The free flow of information and freedom of expression are core values in Hong Kong. We do not intend to change these core values in any way as a result of this consultation."

I would like to use my short speaking time to relate the following example of the benefits of open information and freedom of expression:

Every September, Amnesty International in the USA organizes Banned Books Week to focus on writers who have been jailed around the world simply because of their writings.

In its 29 September 2008 issue, *The New Yorker* magazine (posted by Ligaya Mishan 1.) discussed some previously banned books, including J.D. Salinger famous *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951 and immediately controversial. Although it has sold 6 million copies world-wide and is on many school reading lists for 13 year olds, it is still the most commonly targeted book for removal from the shelves of USA public libraries, due to profanity and its sexual content. ("It's a filthy, filthy book," one school board declared in 2001.)

The American writer and academic Louis Menand reminded us on the 50th anniversary of the book's publication, that *The Catcher in the Rye* was rejected by *The New Yorker* (in the 1950s), not for moral reasons but because "the writing was showoffy." Menand deflects the idea that readers of the book risk

corruption:

“I was introduced to the *The Catcher in the Rye* by my parents, people who, if they had ever imagined that I might, after finishing it, run away from school, smoke cigarettes, lie about my age in bars, solicit a prostitute, or use the word “goddam” in every third sentence, would (in the words of the story) have had about two hemorrhages apiece. Somehow, they knew this wouldn’t be the effect....”

Louis Menand continues:

“One goal of education is to teach people to want the rewards life has to offer, but another goal is to teach them a modest degree of contempt for those rewards, too. In American life, where — especially if you are a sensitive and intelligent member of the middle class — the rewards are constantly being advertised as yours for the taking, the feeling of disappointment is a lot more common than the feeling of success, and if we didn’t learn how not to care our failures would destroy us. Giving *The Catcher in the Rye* to your children is like giving them a layer of psychic insulation”.

I hope this simple example shows the Panel that public education, the role of parents and teachers, and for Hong Kong to continue to have an open attitude to the way we view art, books, writing and any controversial material is important – especially in the face of an Internet that is transnational and extremely difficult to control.

AICAHK will, in the future, make further written submissions.

1. See: www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2008/09/banned-books-we.html