

CENTRAL POLICY UNIT
HONG KONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION

A PILOT STUDY ON THE PRACTICE OF
THEATRE IN HONG KONG

PERFORMING ARTS ASIA

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Executive Summary

1. Mainstream Theatre

First of all, members of the theatrical community hold divergent views on the definition of mainstream theatre, signifying a lack of consensus. Without doubt, most people in the community disagree with such claims that mainstream theatre is qualified only by the relative success of its box office, or just by the presentation of certain drama classics. In fact, the community has presented some very perceptive and forward-looking views, for example, “Mainstream theatre should examine and develop the identity and creativity of local theatre, with the goal of promoting the theatrical movement in Hong Kong and its overall direction.” At the same time, others equate Hong Kong mainstream theatre with those genres that address popular topics, provide strong storylines, present trendy performance styles, and emphasize the purpose of entertainment.

Even successful mainstream theatre evolves as time passes and environments change. As a result, its mode of operation and production outcome are modified. In recent years, the most prevalent global mainstream theatre genre is the musical, and this genre has been brought to the East from the West. Most people take note of the successful marketing and general popularity of the genre, but neglect to differentiate whether musicals nowadays can still sustain the outstanding creativity, and the collaboration of talent of the earlier era that produced one masterpiece after another, encompassing so many different styles and approaches. Commercial productions now face high financial risks, and fewer people are willing to invest in these ventures. Today, most shows on Broadway are revivals, or simply remounting of older productions. How mainstream theatre takes shape and it sustains itself are in fact two unrelated matters. Even countries with a long history of the theatre must constantly search for new opportunities and new directions for mainstream, original creations.

Looking back at the past two or three decades of the development of Hong Kong theatre, we see different evolutions during different phases. For example, translated stage works were dominant, then they gave way to local, original productions; traditional “spoken drama” formats have developed into

diversified stage performance representations. Some people believe that Hong Kong theatre today does not have a truly mainstream audience, only a targeted audience. At the same time, certain so-called non-mainstream (alternative) productions and artists have opted to join the ranks of mainstream theatre. **All the above prove that there is room for mainstream creations, especially in Hong Kong, to develop in both exploratory directions as well as traditional paths, but what is most important is talent and creativity.** There's no doubt that theatre productions with strong entertainment values are easily accepted by the audience, but they still require skilful performances by the artists to really garner cohesion in mainstream theatre.

If someone asks me which type of Hong Kong mainstream theatre was most successful and outstanding in the past, I would answer with a well-known name: Sin Fung Ming (仙鳳鳴) Cantonese opera troupe led by Yam Kim Fai, Bak Suet Sin, Leung Sing Po, along with Tong Dik Seng. They are true guarantees of the highest quality. Although their collaborations occasionally failed, on the whole this was a very successful troupe. Their productions weren't just accepted by the broad populace, critical acclaim and box offices were also spectacular, accentuating the troupe's standards, specialty and room for sustainable growth. If there's a will to develop local mainstream theatre, why not learn from our predecessors?

Why do we examine the current status of local mainstream theatre? It is because the success of mainstream theatre can ensure and promote the success of the theatre profession. **In a free and open society, those engaged in the performing arts not only pursue their own creativity, investigate the art, bring into play the human spirit, but also make a living, in turn receiving acceptance and recognition from society, further sustaining their own development and professional success.** Hong Kong has grown through many years of hard work, now is the time to take this step, especially when everyone is discussing such topics as creative and cultural industries. Developing theatre is no longer a niche concern for a minority. The establishment of this industry will become an important collective issue.

On the other hand, the theatre community is apprehensive about the trend in mainstream theatre emphasizing "entertainment" and "consumption" rather than "culture" and "creativity"; sometimes mainstream productions only rely on the "celebrity factor." However, miscasting has greatly handicapped

professional standards. Some allege that local theatre is influenced by mainstream media (e.g., local television drama), resulting in superficial productions seemingly cut from the same cloth.

Society has its realistic conditions, situations that appear chaotic are inevitable. Precisely because of this, local mainstream theatre that has artistic merit should be encouraged and treated seriously. Not only does it elevate audience's critical appreciation, but it also results in raising cultural awareness, enhancing society at large.

2. Development of the Profession

To summarize the theatrical community's views: this industry, starting from nothing, continues to develop yet it's not a mature industry; there is no consensus or professional support (e.g., union); the market and audience is small, outlook for the profession remains unclear, perhaps a crisis awaits in the near future. What are the reasons? First, some feel that government funding policy for the arts is stalled on the "amateur" level, without regard to the importance of developing the profession, nor does the government understand how artistic outcome can in turn be a gift to society with deep and long lasting effects. Secondly, although there seems to be an active theatre scene with many productions all over the city, there's not much of a demand for professionalism, leading to immobility within the community, resulting in a lack of competitiveness and cohesion. Thirdly, everything in Hong Kong is measured on financial yardsticks, when people see profitable business opportunities in theatre they throw themselves into such ventures, which inevitably leads to such productions catering overtly to popular tastes, becoming superficial, becoming commodified, neglecting professional needs, therefore polarizing the industry.

One could look at these issues from another perspective. First, perhaps it's not just the government that requires a better understanding of the profession; even theatre practitioners need a better understanding of the entire profession, since most people are concerned with their own performances or only look at such questions from an academic point of view, unable to ponder on the concepts of concerted development. Secondly, if theatre practitioners are lacking in professional standards and requisite abilities, naturally they will lack the draw

to attract sponsorship or even bargaining power, let alone creating a demand in the market. Thirdly, to start a professional theatre community in a society that is generally lacking in cultural consciousness, we must accept a space that allows for different types of audience to co-exist. The current, seemingly incongruous situation in theatre is only a natural part of the process.

Certainly, government funding policy should first of all foster the vitality and creativity of the theatre scene, and must consciously support and sustain its development. In order to establish the profession, the theatre community itself must also put in its efforts to ensure there's room allowing for professional development and to establish a dialogue with government funding agencies, so that society at large will gain better understanding of the importance of this profession. **The community agrees that outsiders unfamiliar with theatre should not be put in leadership positions guiding insiders at work. Professional theatre practitioners should unite and establish their own infrastructure, to have the courage to improve the situation, to gain acknowledgement through government policies.** In this way, the profession will establish itself effectively, on solid ground.

The term infrastructure here signifies the ecological system that makes up the theatre, as well as correlating operational requisites (e.g., salary system, venue resources, artistic know-how, talent retention). No matter whether it's the government, the profession, even the general population should have a consensus on all of these to sustain a successful professional environment. Perhaps we have to dismantle certain fixed modes of operation, and adopt more flexible, more effective administrative strategies to match what's needed to foster artistic creativity.

Regarding this matter, different members of the community have already taken initiatives within their own areas of expertise. For example, Ko Chi-Sum has provided operational strategies on how to support small to medium-sized theatre companies; Matthias Woo criticizes the government's lack of cultural policy and points out its various shortcomings; many small to medium-sized theatre companies have actively voiced their wish that funding systems should change to address the needs of serious artists. Although opinions span across the board, but in general, there are some areas where the government and the theatre community should face together and initiate certain reforms. This research project proposes suggestions in the nurturing of talent and fostering

the theatre scene.

3. Artistic Personnel

The theatre community wants to address the following major points:

- i) There's no standard guideline to measure success and return. Apart from the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre operating with a full-time salaried staff, other companies often make many sacrifices just to survive.
- ii) There are problems of professionalism among theatre practitioners. There are many instances of actors missing rehearsals, reflecting their lack of commitment to theatre arts. These are the results of actors taking extra work in order to make ends meet, which would only lower performance standards. Some who have high standards and requisite ability cannot continue such overworked lifestyles and elect to leave the profession, therefore depleting the talent pool.
- iii) Theatre companies lack long-term development plans, with no clearly set goals, and no sense of heritage and legacy.
- iv) Theatre companies gradually lean toward using commercial terms to measure their work, looking only at success or failure quantitatively, rather than providing space to nurture talent as they grow.
- v) Issues with educational and training environment of theatre professionals, including criticism leveled at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

In view of the points listed above, the situation is worrisome. So many years of government funding did not benefit those talented theatre professionals poised for success; they could barely find room for survival. Apart from the theatre community having to address these issues, Hong Kong government's funding policy and how to match real needs with those with talent are very important.

I served in the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts since its founding for fifteen years, witnessing firsthand many of my former students have now become pillar figures in the current theatrical scene. I truly and deeply believe Hong Kong has a pool of talent that's worth nurturing. The question is how to continue this nurturing process, to keep and to help this local elite group improve, and to prepare for the new generation as they enter into the field. These are valuable questions worth investigation.

Since the current market could only repay with minimal return, the most important motivating forces are positive artistic experiences and opportunities to grow, as well as a future that promises room for development for the truly talented theatre professional. **We must differentiate between the arts business and other businesses. Apart from money, of equal importance to the arts community are freedom and space for creativity as well as respect. Only in consideration of these will theatre professionals be energized with vision and commitment to create outstanding works, not just to follow performance as a “business” so to survive, because however robust the business volume, it cannot nurture talent.**

We want a scene where a flagship company provides leadership role, along with self-aware and experienced creative troupes setting good examples for others, with ideals and real abilities to nurture talent. At the same time, the government should seriously consider how funding can support professional theatre companies. At present, even the full-time actors at the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre feel tremendous pressure in their workload, therefore lacking any creative space to absorb, digest and fully crystallize their own experience. As a consequence, performance standards might stagnate.

A surprising outcome from the interviews conducted for this research are reservations and criticisms leveled at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, specifically the level of professionalism and preparedness of recent graduates. Below represent some of the key points gathered from dialogues with executives from theatre companies to teachers at the Academy: first, there's a lack of teaching staff and support network; secondly, Academy leadership seems unable to understand these difficulties and does not work proactively to resolve such problems; thirdly, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts seems to have lost touch, it does not correlate or develop hand in hand with the theatrical circle outside. There are serious consequences if Hong Kong's only professional performing arts academy, which receives hefty annual government funding, cannot seriously examine its performance outcome. What the theatrical community has raised regarding the current situation needs to be further examined.

4. Arts Funding

On the subject of arts funding, almost all theatre companies and individuals recognize the importance of government funding. But the current funding model should be re-examined. Below are the main points collected from the community: first, the government's uniform handling ignores the differences among performing arts companies and disregards the different needs of different types of performances and productions; secondly, the government has an over-emphasis on statistical data, such as number of performances and audience attendance, which forces theatre companies to allocate precious resources in order to meet such requirements, therefore compromising the artistic quality of performances. Thirdly, companies both small and large criticize the government for not really assuming responsibility on long-term development and planning. Some people directly addressed the situation of small- and mid-sized theatre companies being sustained by the government only at the bare minimum (as if feeling through an intravenous saline drip), providing no help whatsoever for the company itself or the entire profession.

From another perspective, government funding should only provide a foundation; success or failure of a company resides on the company itself. Although companies receiving funding do not necessarily have to concern too much about market conditions or balancing ticket income and expense, yet after receiving funding, they should apply their efforts to developing themselves, whether the audience accepted their productions, whether their planning strategies improved, or artistic levels raised.

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) and the Arts Development Council (ADC) have stressed repeatedly the importance of sustainable development of performing arts companies. The LCSD clarifies that no matter with programming, venue rental and promotion, it strives to improve communications with performing arts companies. The ADC stresses that it supports and acknowledges theatre companies becoming professional; funding is not a matter of egalitarianism; it takes seriously theatre companies' direction of development and competitiveness.

Many people acknowledge and agree that arts funding in Hong Kong is better than other countries in the world. Nowadays, how to utilize such valuable resources has become an even more pressing question. Based on

current funding policies, the primary question to be addressed should be: is there space for improvement in the assessment mechanism? The ADC rejects that idea that it's only "dividing the pie" [so everyone gets a share]. Because the theatre industry has grown and matured faster than other creative industries, resources are definitely insufficient. In light of this situation, we might need to address yardsticks for assessment based on meritocracy, and to provide clearer guidelines to performing arts companies and individual practitioners. In fact, some theatre companies advocate the implementation of assessment standards that assume more "responsibility." It could be another way to raise the bar for the entire profession.

In addition, the community hopes the government can explore feasibility of alternate funding plans such as tax exemption for the arts, so that corporations and the theatre community can establish direct links. Because most business corporations and investors only hope for short-term profits, they are not concerned with the long-term development of the theatre profession, only encouraging those money-making productions that attract a wide audience. Entrepreneurs should have longer-term outlooks, and the desire to develop new things as yet unknown. We should strive for long-term investments, including investing in ourselves. For example: Jim Chim Sui-Man recognizes children's theatre is an important avenue to develop PIP (Pleasure, Imagination, Play) in the cultural industry, he realized such goals along that direction. I want to seek the potential outlet of combining government and private funding in the creative process.

With regard to government long-term strategic planning: in view of the results of many years of investment in this area as well as anticipated outcome, perhaps this is high time to implement major reforms in funding policy. **The entire mechanism should centralize and focus resources so to strengthen creative energies. Most importantly, we have to create some room for everyone to advance, and to bring about true competitiveness. This requires evaluation on a very professional level to find the most appropriate and effective solutions.** Please see "Conclusions and Proposals" in this report.

5. Art criticism and the audience

Practitioners in the theatrical community have strong opinions regarding theatre criticism. In general, they consider current criticism suffering from insufficient standard, possessing no influence, sometimes even misleading the audience without offering any proper professional knowledge or grasp of critical appreciation. Some others claim that Hong Kong theatre criticism is merely a type of self-expression that is not at the professional level, perhaps even totally out of touch with the theatre community. The standards for criticism should be examined, but the situation is more complex than it appears.

Representatives of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) claim that a theatre production has to stand up to audiences and the market and to attain a certain artistic level before it can engage criticism and research. They do agree that Hong Kong critics should strengthen their professional knowledge. However, they also point out a hidden problem: as the theatre scene becomes more professional, the distance between criticism and practice will increase, which is a problem in itself. In fact, the development of theatre criticism as a profession requires a longer period of growth and maturity.

Mr. Louis Yu, Chief Executive of the ADC, states that in the past two decades, what's most lacking in Hong Kong was training of critics. There was a lack of professional criticism judging on grounds of theatricality or performance quality. Most criticism was written from purely aesthetic points of view or based on cultural ideology. He also raised another matter that's worth examining: when criticism is weak, theatre practitioners will consider criticism unimportant, and lean further toward the belief that the commercial mindset to operate theatre companies is acceptable. At present, we still debate the importance of criticism, but in five or six years this topic might be moot.

In addition, the community points out that Hong Kong's local media is severely lacking in social responsibility, willfully neglecting the arts and culture to the point of total ignorance, and this situation has now become critical. Entertainment news (including television, newspapers, magazines) only publish paparazzi-type stories, with no one motivated to make any change. This is a reflection of the general lowering of Hong Kong people's cultural sophistication, as well as a marked imbalance in society, which is a tragedy in itself.

What is most worrisome for the theatre community is the quality of the

audience. Apart from a rather stable group of theatregoers who understand stagecraft, most audience now are not those who follow the art, but rather go to the theatre for “entertainment,” “for laughs,” or for the purpose of seeing their idols on stage. The desire to be entertained is not a problem *per se*, but if the level of audience doesn’t improve, the level of theatre can only go down, therefore creating a vicious cycle. The theatre community now proactively assumes the responsibility to nurture the audience. In the long run, raising the quality far exceeds in importance than raising the number of theatregoers.

Here we touch on the topic of theatre education, and Hong Kong’s primary and secondary schools present a problem that should be addressed. **What theatre education can contribute is the nurturing of the culture of art and expression (性情文化), just as the government proclaims the importance of deepening citizens’ knowledge of the social function of art and elevating the general quality of the population.** In short, the government pays lip service to nurture Hong Kong citizens’ artistic appreciation. But the reality is different: we often see government resources being allocated to schools for all sorts of theatre activities, and encouraging participation in these activities. In the end, however, these made no impact on elevating critical appreciation. Some people point out that Hong Kong audience’s level of critical appreciation is lacking, which is the direct result of the failure of primary and secondary education; a general lack of grounding in literature and languages in education provides no fertile soil to plant seeds that can bear fruit, therefore rescinding our responsibility to the next generation.