

# Valuing & Defending the Arts in Hong Kong

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spaces for the making and appreciation of art. Thus, for example, they occupied empty warehouses in previously industrialized areas such as Fotan in the New Territories, creating studio spaces, inexpensive living spaces, and open studio events that imbued local art and the life of artmaking with a tangible and even utopic sense of value.<sup>3</sup> As for the circles of affluence and government decision-making, the thinking was that Hong Kong's new identity would provide cultural or artistic opportunities (as well as those purely related to business) to live rewarding, purposeful lives.

Indeed, the reinvention of Hong Kong has been closely linked to such striking infrastructure projects as the West Kowloon Cultural District. Launched by the Hong Kong government in 2008 and spanning forty hectares of reclaimed land, the West Kowloon Cultural District is known as "one of the largest cultural projects in the world, blending together art, education, open space, hotel, office and residential developments, and retail, dining and entertainment facilities."<sup>4</sup> Among them was the M+ Museum, a museum of visual culture and more, as its inaugural director, Lars Nittve, liked to call it, which opened on November 12, 2021, uniting Hong Kongers exhausted by political divisions and protests, and by the rigors of COVID-19 protocols, in an exuberant embrace of art.<sup>5</sup> Other arts-related sites and venues in the West Kowloon Cultural District include the Arts Pavilion, the Art Park, Freespace, the Hong Kong Palace Museum, and the Xiqu Centre devoted to traditional Chinese opera.

Banker, businessman, and politician Bernard Chan has been a consistently influential spokesperson for a culturally and artistically oriented Hong Kong. Chan served as a member of the legislative council from 1997 to 2008 and as the non-official convenor of the executive council from 2017 to 2022, and since 2022, he has been chair of M+. Because of a serious illness during his youth, Chan opted for a fine arts education at Pomona College, a liberal arts university in California, where he developed his own distinctive painterly style based on pointillist techniques. It is telling that during a crucial period of Hong Kong's reinvention, a liberal arts graduate occupied key roles of power and influence in the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. One of these roles, chairman of the council of Lingnan University, the liberal arts university of Hong Kong, had direct implications for the issue of valuing and defending the arts in Hong Kong. More generally, the influence of Chan and like-minded legislators had a decisive impact on higher education. Among other things, the universities were encouraged to nurture the local talent that the West Kowloon Cultural District needed. The University Grants Committee (UGC), a body consisting of local and nonlocal members who jointly determine funding mechanisms and policymaking for the eight government-funded universities in Hong Kong, issued the call for new programs in 2004.


*External* developments, such as the West Kowloon Cultural District, set the stage for valuing and defending the arts *within* Hong Kong's university sector in the

post-handover era. Yet, the story to be told about the place of the arts within Hong Kong's universities is not an entirely straightforward one. Political conflict about issues of democracy and the pressures from the , ▲ C



provided initial funding for the artist-in-residence program, and additional funding was soon secured on a competitive basis from the Lingnan Foundation, then based at Yale University.

The approach taken for the artist-in-residence program captures the dimensions of public and private value that merit attention. Two artists were recruited each year, one local, the other nonlocal, with the goal of nurturing local talent and building bridges, through culture and art, to other parts of the world. Thus, for example, Kenyan sculptor Elkana Ong'Esa joined Lingnan University for a semester, during which time young students from Hong Kong's most deprived neighborhoods produced sculptures through a life-changing process of intercultural collaboration.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of the strategy of valuing and defending the arts, the most significant principle of selection was the community-oriented nature of the artists' proposals for the exhibition that they would mount as part of their residency. Regardless of their , artists with a singular focus on their own creativity were not seen as contenders for the program. Instead, the program recruited artists who were intent not only on transforming the lives of students through studio practice but on bringing art to the wider community. For example, environmental artist Lai Wai Yi (Monti) invited the entire (extended) Lingnan University community into the multipurpose studio to create a mural that resonated with the distinctive external mosaic walls of Hong Kong's new housing estates, the familiar environments of low-cost housing in Hong Kong.<sup>13</sup> The whole community was involved, and as art touched the lives of students, teachers, researchers, professional services staff, administrators, donors, and even the young children of this Lingnan family, the case was made for the value of art. Participants understood the public value of arts programs, and their connection to Hong Kong's transformation. They similarly understood, through lived experience, the personal or private value of engaging with the world of creative expression.

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over citizenship and democracy, and to assumptions about arts and science fields as, respectively, sources of upheaval and compliance or quietist support.

To take seriously the project of valuing and defending the arts in Hong Kong today is to be mindful of what would count as success in the years to come. It is important to acknowledge that no single measure will suffice, given the extent to which the project is variously distributed across the higher-education sector in Hong Kong. More specifically, each of the government-funded universities in Hong Kong operates within the parameters of a clearly defined role, the government's aim being to support an education sector that is well-differentiated and properly balanced. Some of the universities are more technically oriented (such as The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University), while others have a liberal arts focus (for instance, Lingnan University, Hong Kong Baptist University). Some are comprehensive, offering a full range of programs, including degrees in law and the medical sciences (for example, University of Hong Kong, Chinese University of Hong Kong), while others focus on tailored instruction for specialized vocations (Education University of Hong Kong).

The government is committed to a sector in which the universities (each with an agreed role) balance cross-institutional collaboration with a recurring competition for resources. Given role differentiation, the criteria for measuring success in valuing and defending the arts cannot be identical across the sector. Rather than focus on the success criteria of only one or two arts-heavy environments, we might usefully consider a composite picture of success across Hong Kong and its education sector, with each institution playing a contributing role. Referring to the attitudes, values, and actions of the government of Hong Kong, decision-makers in the cultural sector, parents, donors, and senior management teams within universities, it is fair to say that the project of variously valuing and defending the arts in Hong Kong will be successful if the following picture rings true:

*The policy addresses of the Chief Executive (CE) of Hong Kong.* The cultural, economic, and social contributions made by the arts are acknowledged through clearly specified aspirations in the CE's annual address, a significant event that essentially establishes the "performance indicators" for the Hong Kong government, and its "deliverables" as a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China. An example is the reference in Carrie Lam's policy address of November 25, 2020, in which she identified art and technology as a priority area for the government.<sup>16</sup>

*The schemes of the University Grants Committee and Research Grants Council.* The funding schemes that shape the internal priorities of the universities recognize the value of the arts, providing well-funded opportunities to nur-

ture artistic talent, the skills needed to support a thriving cultural sector, teaching innovation, and excellent (practice-based) research in the arts and humanities.

*Role differentiation across the higher-education sector.* Support for the more arts-intensive universities in Hong Kong is strong. The parameters for competition across the sector are defined in ways that do not unfairly disadvantage the less science-intensive institutions.

*Parents' support for degree programs in the arts and humanities.* As the role played by liberal arts, whole-person, and values-based education in enabling grad-



*Telling the stories.* Through the efforts of the Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities, donors, and the liberal arts universities in Hong Kong, the achievements of remarkable arts and humanities graduates are noticed and



commitment to attracting and retaining talent is reflected in a stable and generous funding regime for the public universities.

A second striking element of continuity is that the basic administrative systems related to running a university in Hong Kong are not maximally delegated to academics as they are, for example, in many universities in the United Kingdom. A striking feature of the Hong Kong university system is the presence of a *large number of well-trained support or professional services staff*, all of them in secure posts and well-versed in the systems that allow a complex organization to function smoothly. The Hong Kong sector offers a well-differentiated, stable institutional environment that limits the number of so-called “direct reports” to a realistic number consistent with the best practices of other sectors. The excellence of the working conditions enjoyed by academics in Hong Kong is not a trivial matter, impacting what teachers and researchers engaged in valuing and defending the arts are actually able to do. Well-supported in a whole host of ways, these Hong Kong academics are in the enviable position, within certain constraints, to be able to pursue a wide variety of freely defined initiatives that are innovative, time-consuming, and resource intensive. For those working in the arts and humanities, such initiatives typically count as compelling articulations of the value of the arts.

Finally, in Hong Kong, a graduate’s success is not solely measured by their earnings, and certainly not the earnings shortly after graduation. The United Kingdom offers a contrasting case, in which the government uses the salaries of graduates fifteen months after their date of graduation to determine whether a degree program has value or offers value for money. As University of Lincoln Vice Chancellor Neal Juster cogently argues, this shortsighted approach to determining the value of an education reflects a profound misunderstanding of the way in which meaningful, purpose-driven life paths are forged, just as it overlooks the extent to which salaries vary on a regional basis.<sup>24</sup> Hong Kong offers a different way of thinking about the value of an education, including in the arts, one that resists the idea that educational value can be made to conform to a single monetary standard. In Hong Kong, the traditional ideals of the literati and principles of Confu-

allegedly trivial nature of the pursuits. Arts-related work takes place in environments of significant infrastructural support, empowering scholars, educators, and practitioners to focus intensely on their core missions. Government policies acknowledge the need for a multifaceted educational ecology, one where liberal arts institutions have a genuine role to play, based on the distinctive value of what they offer—for example, a broad-based education focused on learning how we learn best rather than learning to match acquired skills with soon to be outdated vocational opportunities in the here and now. Finally, educational reforms and policies have essentially mandated the introduction of liberal arts elements into the offerings of all government-funded universities. General education, values-based education, positive education, whole-person education, and service-learning: all these terms are fully in play across Hong Kong's higher-education sector. Inasmuch as these approaches are readily traceable to liberal arts traditions, Hong Kong offers a compelling example of the arts being valued and defended for the sake of the future success of a thriving public. Hong Kong's universities are not merely adopting liberal arts models but adapting them to ensure the best possible outcomes for their students and the city, all within the constraints of the possible.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, I. J. Kim, "The Education of the Filmmaker in Europe, Australia, and Asia" (2013), <https://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~filmstudies/teaching/education-of-the-filmmaker-in-europe-australia-and-asia/>.
- <sup>2</sup> F. H. K. "The Rise and Fall of 'One Country, Two Systems' (China, 1949–2019)," <https://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~filmstudies/teaching/one-country-two-systems/>.
- <sup>3</sup> N. I. K. P. H. K. H. K.



