

Artistic vision

Pedith Chan explores the role of government in cultural development and argues that, in Hong Kong, the right policies on education and research can nurture artists and create a society of art lovers

Cultural development typically goes hand in hand with economic and social transformation. Japan, for one, underwent rapid modernisation and Westernisation during the Meiji period to become Asia's first modern nation. It was at that time that many cultural institutions were introduced and a number of cultural policies formulated. Through such enterprise, Japan successfully created a well-defined culture.

Yet, in Hong Kong, acclaimed as one of the most metropolitan cities in the world, cultural development has lagged behind its significant economic achievements. Thus, it has fallen behind other developed economies.

In this light, chief executive-elect Leung Chun-ying's promise to set up a culture bureau can be considered a great leap forward. Since his announcement, there has been much debate and discussion on the issue, particularly within the art community.

Before any decisions are made, the government should consider some important questions about the bureau: what is the government's role in supporting art and culture as expressions of a democratic society? To what extent will the government affect the autonomy of the artistic and cultural fields? And how will the new bureau operate and be structured?

There's no doubt that an effective cultural policy has the potential to promote a country's cultural identity and foster creativity, whereas a dictatorial culture bureau can jeopardise artistic freedom. To identify the intended roles of the government in artistic creation, one could adopt sociological approaches to explore the functions, direction and mission of the future bureau.

In his influential book, *Art Worlds*, sociologist Howard Becker points out that "art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art". Suggesting that "art as a form of collective action" involves a number of people, Becker offers a broader perspective from which to view the art scene.

The success of an art world depends on the participation of a range of actors, such as government officials, artists, historians, critics, galleries, audience and the like. And by looking closely at the ecosystem of Hong Kong art through the lens of Becker's theories, one soon discovers that some important ingredients of an art world are missing.

For instance, art education at the primary to tertiary levels has historically not been regarded as a top priority within the school curriculum. Consequently, Hong Kong's lack of support for art education has inevitably resulted in a low level of cultural literacy and artistic competence among members of the public.

Furthermore, our ignorance of art and

culture has diminished artists' social status and undermined the important role of art and cultural activities in society. If the government is truly determined to establish Hong Kong as Asia's cultural hub but fails to invest in cultivating an informed public and nurturing young artists, then it is not hard to predict that the establishment of a culture bureau and the abundant investment in cultural development will be in vain.

Another missing piece within the Hong Kong art world is research. The city has a long history of providing a free market for art. In the



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1970s and 1980s, the prestigious auction houses Sotheby's and Christie's set up branches in Hong Kong, and the city has long been ranked by research company Artprice as one of the top five cities in terms of sales revenue.

However, although many contemporary Chinese artists have become well known in the international art scene via Hong Kong, only a handful of Hong Kong artists have benefited from the booming market here. Although more local artists are being promoted by local galleries, scholarly research on Hong Kong artists has not been conducted extensively. This lack of information is one factor that discourages collectors from buying local artwork.

In fact, Hong Kong has never taken advantage of the burgeoning art market to develop its economy and artistic reputation. Art can be a lucrative business with the potential to generate considerable growth in art-related ancillary services and professions, such as art lawyers, insurers and art-specific financial services firms. In the absence of comprehensive

research on the art market and art industry, opportunity has so far passed the city by.

It is clear that one crucial player – the government – can put in place the parts of an art world that Hong Kong still lacks. In this regard, it should make plans with a broader vision to promote art and culture. Thus, the government should take responsibility for drafting an effective cultural policy, thereby creating a vibrant, diverse and productive cultural environment through discussions and collaboration with different governmental departments, cultural professionals and scholars.

A suitable leader of the new culture bureau would not only have a global vision but also – most importantly – profound knowledge of art, history and culture, as well as a thorough understanding of the operational logic and values of the Hong Kong art world itself.

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