

Visual Arts Education in Face of Hong Kong's Cultural Policy (or its lack of) – a Revelation from the HKBU Kai Tak Campus Incident

Wong Ying-kay Ada Translated by Roberta Freya

Before diving into the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) Kai Tak Campus Incident, we should begin with Chow Fan-fu's pre-Handover article "A Policy-less Cultural Policy – Government-led Cultural Activities in Colonial Hong Kong"¹.

"A Policy-less Cultural Policy"

The 1967 riots not only greatly disturbed the colonial rule, but impacted its governance model. The colonial government was unenthusiastic in its support of cultural activities prior to the riots, but the British saw that "attending performances" could be a "healthy leisure activity" to stabilise the society, entertain the citizens and increase their sense of belonging. Hence, from the 1970s onwards, the government heartily supported performance arts via the Urban Council, sponsoring the Hong Kong Arts Festival, catalysing the professionalisation of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra and the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, and in 1984 founded the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (APA) and the Council for the Performing Arts (the predecessor of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council).

The government showered billions of dollars on performing arts and its education, leaving visual arts and literature as orphans – starved of resources and venues. Largely ignored by the government, the two areas were supported by the effort of individual cultural practitioners. Some explained that the lack of support was due to the art forms' lack of mass appeal and their potential of sparking cultural awareness and the discovery of a cultural identity. Since the colonial government wanted to prevent their subjects from "over-thinking", emphasising on performing arts and understating visual arts became the main direction of its "cultural policies".

The biased funding system, alongside the inflexibility of cultural bureaucracy, was inherited by the SAR government. Despite slight changes like the establishment of the Arts Promotion Office (under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department), the fundamentals remain unchanged: performing arts still garner over 60% of all arts funding. With the government neglecting visual arts, tertiary education in visual and performing arts fared very differently: whilst APA celebrates its 30th Anniversary, Hong Kong still does not have one single institute that focuses on visual arts.

Hong Kong Arts Development Council: *A Feasibility Study on Setting up a Visual Arts Academy in Hong Kong*²

Under the urge of cultural practitioners and the pressure of councilors, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council commissioned the above Feasibility Study in 2002, detailing various possibilities of and proposals for developing an Academy of Visual Arts in Hong Kong. Understandably, building a new education infrastructure would require lengthy discussions, the anchoring of a suitable site and extensive legislative processes. The Feasibility Study suggested that should resources be unavailable in the near future, the government could consider adopting compromised proposals such as expansion of current foundations, cooperation between different departments, and setting up a cross-institutional consortium. The Study conjectured that by blending the University of Hong Kong's Fine Arts Department, the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Department of Fine Arts and the Hong Kong Arts School's Bachelor Programme, Hong Kong will have its prototype for the Academy of Visual Arts.

It would, of course, not be an easy task to get the heavily-sectarian tertiary institutes in Hong Kong to cooperate. The Study was done 10 years ago, coinciding the stepping up of Ho Chi-ping Patrick as Secretary for Home affairs. As the Former Chairman of the Arts Development Council, Ho understood the needs of the arts field, but establishing an independent Academy of Visual Arts during his term would be unrealistic. Ho has been long-term buddies with Ng Ching-fai (then President and Vice Chancellor of the HKBU). Inspired by Ng's passion, Ho supported the establishment of HKBU's Academy of Visual Arts (AVA) in November 2004. AVA's Bachelors of Visual Arts programme commenced in 2005. As AVA started with a very small scale, the University did not even need approval of extra quotas from the University Grants Committee; after integrating quotas from various departments, AVA managed to accept its first cohort of students in record time.

Plate 1 (left)
Members of HKBU AVA Campus Development Concern Group protested on the opening of HKBU School of Chinese Medicine, location of which is the heritage site Lui Seng Chun

Plate 2 (right)
Members of HKBU AVA Campus Development Concern Group submitted a letter of appeal to Albert Chan, President of HKBU. Next to him were Carrie Lam, the then Secretary for Development Bureau, and Wilfred Wong, Chairman of HKBU Board of Directors



Merely looking at their names, the Academy of Visual Arts and the Academy for Performing Arts seem to be comparable; but obviously, this is all an illusion. APA has billions of dollars worth of resources, boasting of a total annual income of \$4 billion. Despite having a \$54 million surplus in fiscal year 2010/11, APA was granted an extra \$3 billion to expand its campus for its 700 Bachelors programme students. What about AVA? It barely managed to pay its \$300,000 rent last year for the heritage campus that educates 80 students.³



Plate 3
AVA campus open day
on 26 May 2012

Apart from Ng's passion and leadership, Ho's effort in anchoring the beautiful campus for AVA lent a hand to its successful establishment in such a short time. HKBU financed the renovation of the Kai Tak campus, and celebrated its opening in January 2006.

A Midsummer's Visual Arts Student Movement: the Heritage Campus Incident

The campus is situated in an 80 year-old colonial building in the mid-levels of Ping Shek, Kowloon. Once a Royal Air Force Headquarter and officers' mess, the Grade Two Historical Building was awarded the 2009 *UNESCO* "Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation". Trekking a mild slope up into a mint-green Shangri-la, the campus flourishes under the shades of the Flame of the Forests and the heritage site. Inspired by the lush environment, the visual art students' works prosper with an enlightened aura. Despite its lack of advanced facilities and adequate resources, the verdant education environment provides a nurturance that no other office-like building can bring.

News came out in March 2012 that the campus' lease signed under Ho's term would expire. The government decided to hike the once "symbolic" rent to the "market" price of \$300,000 per month. When HKBU announced that they will cease the tenancy, alumni and students of AVA got together and founded the "HKBU AVA Campus Development Concern Group" to protest against the abandoning of the Kai Tak Campus. Employing their unbeatable creativity, they "used art to save art" and organised an affecting student movement.

Plate 4 (left)
HKBU AVA Campus
Development Concern
Group and a model of
the Kai Tak Campus



Plate 5 (right)
HKBU AVA Campus
Development Concern
Group ready to depart at
7.1 rally



The University's stance was simple: the new Communication and Visual Arts Building was ready and teaching and creative spaces have been reserved for AVA. The heritage building was just a temporary facility and AVA cannot have both the new building and the heritage campus. AVA's teachers and students noted that the University Management's attitude towards AVA went downhill ever since Ng's retirement. The University has always focused on employment and salary statistics of graduates, and since a lot of graduates from AVA are freelancers with unstable income, the University despises them and sees them as the black sheep dragging the figures down. 2012 saw the changeover between the tertiary education system in Hong Kong and universities have to accommodate a double cohort of students; HKBU contradictorily belittled the Academy by cancelling the 13 quotas reserved for AVA freshmen that year.

The mastermind behind this incident was HKBU's Council Chairman Wong Ying-wai Wilfred, who was also the Chairman of the Arts Development Council. He "wanted to help" and suggested that the Council rented one level of the Kai Tak Campus as their headquarters. Playing a double role, he somehow confused the needs of two starkly different organisations: the Council's role is to provide funding and move policies, why should it be mixed with AVA, whose role is to educate? He is of such immense help in all this mess!

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Plate 6 (left)
The Concern Group
team at 7.1 rally

Plate 7 (right)
Ada Wong and Miranda
Szeto joined the meeting
to demonstrate the
support to students from
the cultural sector

The Concern Group steering this movement has a fresh image and a sincere attitude. Over five sleepless months of hard labour, they managed to state evidences and harness public support with their precise organisation, creative communication and persuasive deliveries. They began with designing leaflets that depicted their life at the Kai Tak Campus, collected over one thousand signatures, organised open days, forums and docent tours; during the July 1st protest, they carried a huge model of the Kai Tak Campus and paraded down the road, winning the hearts of the general public.

Upon the termination of the lease in August 2012, HKBU's administrative departments started evacuating the campus while the Concern Group stayed put. At a talk organised by students of the Concern Group, they stated that “despite the fact that we have nothing, we still have art.” Thus, they organised “Raising AVA, Saving AVA”, a charity auction supported by artists including Pak Sheung-chuen, Lee Kit, Wilson Shieh and Kacey Wong and other alumni, and raised \$683,550⁴. With only three weeks to prepare for the event, the Concern Group managed the auction, produced catalogues, publicised the activity, answered media interviews and displayed immense professionalism and moving team-spirit. All I can say is that the fertile Kai Tak Campus has raised great characters.

Shortly after the auction, the government decided not to raise the rent; HKBU could continue renting the Kai Tak Campus and the various parties gained one more year to discuss long-term proposals.

Three Revelations from the Kai Tak Campus Incident

1. The Essential Procedural Justice

Students and teachers of AVA burst with a sense of mission, but establishing a small-scaled academy of visual arts inside a university is less a recommendation of the 2002 *Feasibility Study* than expediency between the Secretary and the Vice Chancellor; since the resources for the establishment did not come from within the government, procedures like debates within the Legislative Council and passing the bill (APA is a statutory body) could be skipped. This short-term proposal is neither fish nor fowl; how could AVA carry out sustainable development if the government lacks consensus with regards to the subject and fails to provide policy and stable financial support? The expediency led to the seeming amnesia of the HKBU's senior management and the indifference of the Home Affairs Bureau.

Plate 8 (left)
A performance art to represent the potential danger of producing arts in an enclosed chamber

Plate 9 (right)
“Arts saves arts”
mid-summer auction



All new policies should have procedural justice: embodying transparency, public participation, open discussions within the Legislative Council and consensus amongst the government department. Regarding the construction of infrastructure, an appropriate piece of land should be sought, the budget should be approved of and the project should get in line for funding. This might be a long road to walk down; *the Partnership Scheme in Revitalising Historic Buildings* took four to six years, with occasional obstructions, to finish from planning to renovation. One must bear in mind that education is a life-long engagement, procedural justice is more important than speed.

2. Colonial Mentality of Hong Kong's Visual Arts Education

Researchers from the *2002 Feasibility Study* interviewed the industry's major stakeholders and came up with a unanimous consensus regarding the establishment of an academy of visual arts. The government's inaction towards this is unbelievable: upon the 15th anniversary of the Handover, why is the government keeping the colonial mentality of neglecting visual arts education? Do they not want the citizens to think about their identity? One explanation might be that Hong Kong's cultural policy is not centralised under a Cultural Bureau. Culture, education, creative industries are scattered around various departments; none of the indifferent officials are willing to bear any responsibility towards the arts, let alone stand up for it.

A true academy of visual arts should be a statutory body like APA and have its own campus. More research should be done with regards to the organisation of the academy: possibilities such as an expansion of student quotas and scale of AVA, establishing a consortium or promoting it into an arts university could solve this long-term conundrum. The Kai Tak Campus incident is a symptom; the cause of the ailment is the government's lack of policy and sense of responsibility towards tertiary arts education and the nurturance of artists.

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3. Change can only be brought about through a Civil Society

The HKBU AVA Campus Development Concern Group showed us the energy, courage and respectable tenacity of today's youth. Their action is similar to other movements in Hong Kong: those who were impacted rose to protect their beloved space. Their slogan "Do not let Kai Tak Dissipate in the Wind" show their peaceful and creative opposition. Their "Raising AVA, Saving AVA" action is especially moving, garnering positive support from the public which finally led to concessions made by the government.

Now that they have protected their space, what's next? This oftentimes is the most difficult step. They can now enjoy a pause in the immediate conflict, teachers have to teach, students have to attend classes; we should not place the responsibility on their shoulders. But Hong Kong desperately need a champion who can lead the discussion on the development of visual arts education, to lobby

Plate 10 (left)
“Arts saves arts”
mid-summer auction
catalogue



Plate 11 (right)
Discussion forum on
Sai Yeung Choi Street
to raise the public's
awareness of the issue



for the professionalisation of visual arts education, and harness resources and campus grounds; who can carry this heavy responsibility?

It would not be the Arts Development Council nor the government (APA was established under the forward-looking cultural vision of Sir MacLehose, then Hong Kong Governor). Today, the responsibility lies in you, me and the power of a civil society. Despite the huge expenditure spent on research by the government, it is all just talk shop. Nothing has really been changed with regards to visual arts in tertiary education; the cultural development of Hong Kong is incomparable to that of Taiwan, Singapore or South Korea. The difference does not lie in resources, but in the conviction and determination of the government and civil society. This has led to the continuation of the colonial expediency and half-hearted development of cultural education in the past 15 years.

Photo credit: HKBU AVA Campus Development Concern Group

Wong Ying-kay Ada is the Executive Director of the Hong Kong Institute of Contemporary Culture

¹ *Ming Pao Monthly*, November, 1996, p. 68

² Editor's note: The Report was completed in August 2002:
http://www.hkadc.org.hk/rs/File/info_centre/reports/200209_vaa_report.pdf

³ According to “80: HKBU AVA Graduation Exhibition 2011” information, there were 80 graduates from HKBU AVA in 2011. <http://ava.hkbu.edu.hk/gallery/80-ava-graduation-exhibition-2011/>

⁴ Figures provided by HKBU AVA Campus Development Concern Group