

Developing Networks of Culture: Governments' Strategies and Civic Pioneers

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Zuni Icosahedron has recently hosted two cultural exchange forums, at the Grotowski Institute, Wrocław, Poland in September and at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok in November 2022. The conferences gathered experts and scholars alike to discuss the essence of cultural exchange, its emergence, and some successful cases. Given the diversity in their cultural backgrounds, the attendees have contributed unique and distinctive perspectives. We discussed with vigour the opportunities and challenges regarding the future of cultural development. The discussion concerns particularly the possibility of Hong Kong becoming a centre for cultural exchange and how it can facilitate cultural exchanges between China and Asia, amid Asian countries, or among countries in Asia, Europe and beyond.

Consider the establishment of government-run cultural centres as a strategy

Since the mid 20th century, numerous

countries have become involved in cultural exchange through the establishment of cultural centres, a standard national tactic.

There are plenty of cultural centres in different parts of the world, many of which aim to extend the reach of cultural influence and are significant bases that support or further cultural exchange. At present, the United Kingdom has set up altogether 230 cultural centres in 110 countries and districts; and Germany has set up over 150 cultural centres (also known as The Goethe-Institut) in 92 countries. There are 144 French cultural centres in 91 nations and 800+ venues of all forms owned by the United States for promoting cultures; the Japan Foundation runs 25 offices all around the world and India, despite being a developing country, has set up 37 cultural centres.

Equally, as of April 2019, the Chinese government operates 37 China Cultural Centres (CCC) around the globe, 17 of which are located in regions along The One Belt, One Road sphere of influence. The cultural

exchange activities run by CCCs, however, reflect some limitations and hindrances in its current state of development.

First, their development is inhibited by a single outlook limiting their role to no more than cultural dissemination. These overseas cultural centres, with a specific target in mind, play the role of “marketing” and imparting cultures to the Chinese who are living abroad. The word ‘cultural exchange’ is self-explanatory – it is, as a matter of fact, a two-way street. A win-win situation will follow if bilateral interaction is assured. But is it possible for CCCs to fulfil such an ideal role?

What are the setbacks these CCCs in 37 cities experience in their respective plan for cultural development? How would CCCs have an honest and fair conversation with these countries?

Secondly, the scope of programmes which rely on entertainment, culture and tourism has limited the exchange. By far, the most impactful project is the entertainment programme named “Happy Chinese New Year”. However, barely any effort is made to explore culture itself, multiculturalism or delve deeper into the core of cross-cultural exchange. Is it plausible to expect CCCs to perform like the aforementioned examples such as, The Goethe-Institut or The Japan Foundation – to provide comprehensive support for cross-cultural and experimental creations, research as well as talent development?

Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices (ETOs) are now seen as another foothold in the global network. As the Chief Executive’s 2021 Policy Address states “The overseas Economic and Trade Offices (ETOs) and Mainland Offices will also play an important

role in promoting the cultural industries of Hong Kong”. With reference to the cases of The Goethe-Institut, British Council and The Japan Foundation, it was not difficult to envisage what CCCs and ETOs could in fact do in promoting cultural exchange. These government-run centres could undoubtedly play a vital role in building networks and platforms, cultivating talents and initiating meaningful strategic studies.

Consider civic art groups as pioneers

There are two main issues that often affect government-led cultural exchange networks:

First, we must concern ourselves with how unilaterally the “network” develops. Many networks exist for the sake of “culture export”, but do not foster two-way collaborative relationships. In many instances, the other end of the network is reduced to the role of receiver instead of being a partner or a mate that helps mutual understanding and learning. How to outgrow the ‘marketing’ approach and maintain fair and balanced relationships in the network is indeed the first problem to solve.

The second problem is the sustainability of networks. Many models of international collaboration or global networks last for the period of a one-off or short-term exchange, and are thus unfavourable for continual interaction and communication. Having said that, there might be all sorts of reasons and challenges at play, such as lack of funds, poor coordination among institutions, political frictions and scepticism, and especially a lack of vision and planning through shortage of leaders and managers.

If governmental organisations can cooperate with civic art groups, which are always on the

frontline of arts and cultures development, this will not only maximise flexibility, but also lead to creation of more down-to-earth content. This will ensure two-way collaborative relationships and hence the establishment of a long-term network amongst artists and art groups.

Let us look at the Tokyo Performing Arts Meeting (TPAM) as an example. Initially named Tokyo Performing Arts Market, it was first launched in 1995. In 2011, its main venue was relocated to Yokohama, and renamed as TPA 'Meeting' instead of 'Market'. TPAM has since embarked on multiple projects, exchanges, and collaboration with local institutions. In 2015, it joined the rest of Asia and took part in international collaboration. It is now a highly influential performing arts platform in Asia and the only such platform in Japan. Its thirty years of history illustrate the possibility of maintaining a sustainable network.

Another example is Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting (BIPAM) – a platform for regional and international exchanges and conferences. It was initiated by a group of theater aficionados and producers. It has now grown into a platform that brings together artists, scholars, and critics. Since its establishment in 2017, BIPAM has in a relatively short space of time become exemplary for its proactive approach in sustaining a community as well as building a network of performing arts for independent artists and cultural professionals.

In contrast to the examples of TPAM and BIPAM, metropolises like Hong Kong and Singapore merely host the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Singapore International Festival of Arts. Rarely could we find citizen-initiated events like "HIPAM" or "SIPAM" or

any cultural exchange platforms started off by civic groups to fill the gap which governmental cultural centres and arts festivals cannot fulfil. Before the pandemic, Zuni ran Hong Kong Belt Road City-to-City Cultural Exchange Conference for three years in a row from 2017. This is also a model in search of genuine exchange of cultures.

Towards 2023 in the post-pandemic era, how should Zuni and other civic frontline cultural groups approach building a network of cultures? And how could this approach deepen the collaboration between government-run cultural centres and other cultural institutions?

Conclusion

Besides establishing a sustainable global network and cultivating visionary leaders, it is crucial to lay the foundation based on knowledge for strategic planning. There are foundations already built by organisations such as governmental cultural centres and offices which have space, human resources, and funds and which should suffice for growing extensive networks. Particularly, there is support from the government's policies. After all, tenacious support of frontline arts groups is much needed to generate more open and ground-breaking ideas for offering prospects of continuous exchange and mapping future development of arts and cultures. To seize the opportunities in the face of challenges is our only way forward. (End)