

Valuing & Defending the Arts in Hong Kong

Mette Hjort

Focusing on a period of just over two decades (1997–2023), this essay charts how the most salient approaches to valuing and defending the arts in Hong Kong reflect the changing political circumstances of the city. I select two approaches for close analysis. Emphasizing the private and public value of the arts, the first approach reflects efforts to reinvent Hong Kong in the wake of the handover to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Influenced by significant social unrest in 2014 and 2019, and by the introduction of the National Security Law in 2020, the second approach seeks protection for the arts through collaboration with the sciences. The exceptional conditions that Hong Kong offers for meaningful arts-related work are identified to facilitate international comparisons.

In the West, the past few decades have witnessed growing challenges for projects aimed at valuing and defending the arts in higher education, the wider environment in countries such as Denmark or those in the United Kingdom being defined by a significant degree of government skepticism (some would say hostility) toward arts subjects.¹ During much of the same period, the situation in Hong Kong was very different. To understand some of the key differences, we must look to the process of reinventing Hong Kong following its return to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, and to how new aspirations for the city created a fertile terrain for arts subjects within the universities. In the wake of the so-called handover (from the United Kingdom to the PRC), the need to imagine a new postcolonial identity for a city that was to be fully absorbed into the “Motherland” after a period of fifty years (by 2046) became a persistent preoccupation for business leaders, civil servants and the government, teachers and scholars, filmmakers and artists, and, not least, young students.²

While Hong Kong's role as a global financial center featured centrally in well-accepted characterizations of the city-state prior to 1997, the post-handover era witnessed a series of ambitious attempts, both at the grassroots level and at more official levels, to develop a more capacious conception of what life in Hong Kong could be. In postcolonial Hong Kong, artists who had turned their backs on traditionally preferred occupations in the financial sector came together to forge

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.³ 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."⁴ Among them was M+, 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.⁵ 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 PRC's concerns and interests have complicated matters. Consistent with the launch of the West Kowloon Cultural District project, the scope for demonstrating and defending the value of the arts in Hong Kong's universities between 1997 and 2014 was considerable. However, in the wake of the civil disobedience movement of 2014, the anti-extradition movement of 2019, and the introduction of the National Security Law in 2020, the value of arts and humanities subjects and studio-based programs became far more ambiguous, and the task of defending all these within a university setting much more complex.⁶

The civil disobedience movement of 2014, which is known as both "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" and the "Umbrella Movement," was to a significant extent a secondary school and university phenomenon, initiated and sustained by students and their teachers or professors. Protesters from liberal arts backgrounds with commitments to arts and humanities fields were especially well-represented in the movement, as compared, say, with those coming from business or finance. Graduation ceremonies at the government-funded universities became theatrical performances that inevitably highlighted ideological contrasts, oppositional mentalities rather than political indifference, or even outright support for the government. At Lingnan University, graduates in cultural studies walked across the stage in combat gear while brandishing large yellow umbrellas and demonstratively ignoring the ceremonial requirement of respect for the chief executive's delegate, none other than the aforementioned Bernard Chan. Graduates from the business faculty behaved quite differently, being content to follow the usual protocols with the expected respect. The contrast and underlying political preferences were not lost on the government, and it is fair to say that the Legislative Council of Hong Kong has been somewhat skeptical about arts and humanities subjects since 2014, and reserved about those who make it their mission to defend them.

In considering these two periods – the one more hospitable to the arts (1997–2014), and the other less so (2015–2023) – two quite different strategies for valuing and defending the arts in Hong Kong universities become apparent.⁷ Grounded in the increasingly favorable conditions of the first period, one strategy adopted by those engaged in arts fields was to foreground both the public and the private value of the arts in their own right. Embracing self-understandings that emphasized contributions to *public value*, arts educators and practitioners in the universities claimed to be doing their part to imagine a spiritually richer Hong Kong by building a diverse and far larger cultural sector, while developing the necessary educational ecology to sustain it. In terms of *private value*, the rationale offered for the arts had to do with the qualitative difference that art would make to the lives of those who were touched by it, through engagement in actual artistic

practices or in the critical study of the arts, or by exercising the acquired capacity to become involved meaningfully with the arts during moments of culturally informed leisure.

Arguments that considered both the public and private value of the arts resonated within the universities because of Hong Kong's far-reaching attempt to reform its university education in light of "the overall aims of education for the twenty-first century."⁸ The Education Commission released a policy document in 2000 that outlined the parameters for a significant transformation of Hong Kong's education sector within a little more than a decade.⁹ Supported and implemented in September 2012 with a "one-off \$550 million non-capital provision for the UGC-funded" universities, the so-called 3/3/4 reform mandated by the Education Commission encouraged a dramatic emphasis across Hong Kong's university sector on whole-person education, general education, internationalization, co-curricular learning, and service-learning – developments that are broadly consistent with liberal arts traditions.¹⁰ The result was a context in which the arts and humanities could thrive, and where robust articulations of their value could be met with broad support. The contrast with other jurisdictions was striking. At a time when governments in the West were increasingly challenging the value of an arts and humanities education, Hong Kong's UGC was urging the creation of new programs in subject areas such as visual studies.

The strategy of appreciating and defending the arts by showcasing their public and private value is evident in one of the submissions received in response to the committee's call for programs in visual studies (the call was issued by the UGC in 2004 with the goal of fostering and developing the talent that would be needed in the West Kowloon Cultural District). Consistent with its liberal arts mission and vision, Lingnan University bid for the right to offer a new bachelor's program in visual studies in 2004, and in 2005 launched an interdisciplinary liberal arts–style program with a strong emphasis on philosophical aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, film and media studies, and art history.

Recognizing the diversity of students' talents in keeping with the theory of multiple intelligences, the program introduced a substantial component of studio practice in 2005.¹¹ Studio practice was seen as a means of supporting less academically inclined learners, a matter of some significance given that Lingnan University typically recruits students from low-income backgrounds who are the first in the family to attend university. To support the elements of studio practice and, just as important, to assist with the project of articulating the value of visual studies, Lingnan University introduced an artist-in-residence program in 2006. Requested by academic staff in visual studies, this initiative was made possible by the visionary commitments of then Vice Chancellor Edward Chen, a Keynesian economist of humble background and stellar accomplishments who fully understood how education can transform lives (Chen was Oxford-educated). Chen

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.¹²

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 fame, 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.¹³ 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.

The second strategy for valuing and defending the arts is informed by the reality of the government's less trusting stance on liberal arts subjects and practices from 2014 onward. In essence, it involves the integration of the arts into large interdisciplinary undertakings that feature science and technology to a significant degree. These disciplinary spheres, at some distance from the arts and humanities, attract inherently trustworthy academics with little inclination to use the university as a platform for political action. To value and defend the arts in this context is to show that technological developments and their applications – for example, the ever more pervasive presence of artificial intelligence in everyday life – call for perspectives informed by the arts. It is a matter of demonstrating that the arts are open to change, informed by the innovations of science and technology, and of proving that when appropriately integrated into interdisciplinary undertakings involving the sciences, the arts can be sufficiently neutral to clear the successive rounds of government vetting that large resource-intensive projects entail.

Much like the first strategy, this second one sits comfortably within the context of conditions created by policymakers. More specifically, in her policy address of 2020, then chief executive of Hong Kong Carrie Lam made a commitment to the development of the art-tech sector in Hong Kong, a pledge backed by a substantial injection of HK\$100 million (approximately US\$12 million), which would encourage university presidents and vice chancellors to pursue funding for the arts through art-tech schemes, and inspire proponents of the arts to reimagine their research or practice in light of the possibilities afforded by technology. In this context, valuing and defending the arts is often about demonstrating a capacity to engage in team-based work across the divide that novelist and physical chemist C. P. Snow called “two cultures.”¹⁴

Under the leadership of President and Vice Chancellor Alexander Ping-kong Wai, Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) offers a good example of how universities are responding to the emphasis on art tech. A physicist recruited to HKBU in 2021 from a role as provost at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Wai has been keen to establish HKBU as a leader in the art-tech space. In 2021–2022, Wai led a transnational team of computer scientists, new media artists, and film scholars at HKBU, City University of Hong Kong, and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne to develop a bid for funding from the Innovation and Technology Fund (ITF).¹⁵ Entitled “Future Cinema Systems: Next-Generation Art Technologies,” and focusing on the work of the celebrated new media artist Jeffrey Shaw and the contributions of the equally well-established digital museologist Sarah Kenderdine, the project was awarded almost HK\$35.5 million in 2022.

Unsurprisingly, given the size of the award, the vetting undertaken by the ITF was vigorous, detailed, and time-consuming. With Shaw collaborating with West Kowloon’s Palace Museum (in the context of its inaugural exhibition), the value of “Future Cinema Systems” was well-understood by important opinion leaders within and close to the government, in addition to members of the ITF’s panel of assessors (all of whom are also well known to the government). The trust afforded to this arts project stems from the sheer size of the investment, with all the necessary checks and balances, and from the staunch support of science-based advocates at the highest level of the university, a level that is itself subject to the most rigorous of vetting processes (including, informally, from the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region).

In evoking these two strategies, the first focused on the intrinsic value of the arts, the second on the ability of the arts to draw on and expand the sphere of application for science and technology, I do not mean to suggest that no other approaches have been adopted during the timeframes in question. But these two ways of valuing and defending the arts are especially salient in and particular to the Hong Kong landscape. Some of its unique characteristics are ultimately traceable to the dramatic political conflicts of 2014, 2019, and 2020 – that is, to struggles

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.¹⁶
- *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 graduates to live lives of “consequence, inquiry and accomplishment” is increasingly recognized, parents support their children’s pursuit of an education in the arts.¹⁷
- *Donors' earmarking of gifts for arts-related projects.* Nonprofit, charitable organizations such as the Tin Ka Ping Foundation continue to support values-based educational projects in the arts and humanities.¹⁸
- *Power and voice within the universities.* Arts and humanities fields are well-represented at the highest level of executive management (president and vice chancellor, provost, vice presidents, and associate vice presidents). Public figures appointed to the courts and councils, the highest levels of university governance, include individuals of remarkable achievement whose contributions reflect a strong commitment to the arts.
- *Academic freedom, censorship, and self-censorship.* The culture of debate, consensus building, and academic governance is protected by visionary university leaders whose integrity, probity, and pragmatism allow them to defend academic and artistic freedoms in circumstances of scrutiny and constraint.
- *Interdisciplinary teams, grand challenges, and “wicked problems.”* Far from being marginalized, arts and humanities scholars and arts practitioners are encouraged to participate in team-based initiatives aimed at advancing goals such as the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (currently the case at Lingnan University and increasingly the case at Hong Kong Baptist University).
- *Demonstrating the value of the arts to society through community-oriented pedagogies and practices.* Teachers, scholars, and practitioners of the arts understand and support the principles of service-learning, community engagement, and knowledge exchange.¹⁹
- *Students' success.* Graduates of the arts and humanities continue to demonstrate a capacity to establish deeply meaningful career paths, both in Hong Kong and internationally.

- *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 celebrated through widely told stories that highlight these individuals' creativity, adaptability, collaborative mindsets, and purpose-driven commitment to civic values rising far above narrow self-interest.

It is telling that none of these elements of a composite picture of success are entirely absent (and thus merely aspirational) in Hong Kong. In this sense, the path to success already exists. That said, there is room for a greater degree of commitment for galvanizing efforts in some of these areas.

Regarding censorship, there are growing concerns about academic and artistic freedoms in Hong Kong, the full ramifications of the National Security Law being a natural driver of censorship and self-censorship. And yet there are also reasons for optimism. Countless examples of what remains possible in Hong Kong could be adduced, but two highly suggestive ones suffice to make the point about the still significant scope for agency.

First, the opening of the M+ museum in 2021 provided Hong Kong residents with access to media mogul Uli Sigg's remarkable collection of Chinese art, and more specifically to thought- and discussion-provoking China-focused works that can hardly be described as risk averse or banally innocent. Second, supported by grants from the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Baptist University (in addition to non-local funding from such sources as the Guggenheim Foundation in the United States and the Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal), American-Russian composer Eugene Birman has been able, as a peripatetic artist and Hong Kong academic, to produce the most uncompromising artistic work without sidelong glances at censors or the mobilization of internal processes of self-censorship. Based on more than five hundred anonymized interviews with "ordinary Russians and those living in neighboring countries," Birman's documentary opera entitled *Russia: Today* (the UK premiere was held at King's Place in London in 2023, and sung by EXAUDI) explores the "complexities and contradictions of contemporary Russia" with an honesty so unrelenting that the work cannot be performed in Russia.²⁰ This meaningful, deeply moving work was to a significant extent made possible by Hong Kong.

Concerns about various freedoms in Hong Kong appear at times to have become less acute among academics and artists following the departure of Carrie Lam (whose time in office challenged the One Country, Two Systems arrangement, arguably for reasons having more to do with personality than ideology or politics). Artists and academics who once saw their own departure from Hong Kong as imminent currently speak of a continued loyalty for the city that is, or has become, their home.²¹

While there is a clear contrast to be drawn between the two periods discussed above, it is important, especially within the context of global debates about the relative merits of different educational philosophies, types of universities, and funding regimes, to draw attention to a very significant element of continuity. Hong Kong's government-funded universities, across the entire timeframe under consideration here, offered remarkable conditions of employment. While casualization, precarity, and modest salaries shape the reality of many who choose to work in higher education in the United Kingdom – witness the significant strike activity of 2022 and 2023 organized by the University and Colleges Union in support, among other things, of better pay and more manageable workloads – the same cannot be said of Hong Kong.²² Scholars and teachers in Hong Kong who are engaged in valuing and defending the arts are typically on a tenure track or already tenured. To be employed by a Hong Kong university, irrespective of field, is to enjoy a generous salary, modest taxation rate, and a gratuity more or less equivalent in size to the taxes owed. Additional benefits such as health insurance and housing (or a housing allowance) accompany the basic package, creating the peace of mind to be fully immersed in core activities. At the time of their recruitment, academics are offered sizeable research initiation grants, the aim being to facilitate research endeavors as these new colleagues prepare to apply for widely available, generous external funding.

The favorable conditions generally enjoyed by Hong Kong academics warrant additional comment. Salaries in the university sector were previously linked to those in the civil service. For example, an elite university such as the University of Hong Kong once served the role of providing a steady flow of talent for highly coveted positions in the colonial government. University salaries were unlinked from the civil service scale in 2004, paving the way for the possibility of greater variations of remuneration consistent with the principles of market demand.²³ Preparations for the launch of four-year degree programs (the aforementioned 3/3/4 reform) included the recruitment of a sizeable number of academics, the vast majority of them from institutions outside Hong Kong. At the time, generous packages were seen as consistent with Hong Kong's ambition to attract the "best and the brightest," namely, to compete successfully with leading institutions around the world.

Every now and then, an influential person (for example, Regina Ip, founder and chairperson of the New People's Party) floats thoughts about recruiting extensively from China (where academic salaries are significantly lower) or about mirroring the nine-month salary arrangement adopted by some universities in the United States. To date, proposals along these lines have failed to gain any real traction, and there is no indication that this situation will change any time soon. Ambitious on behalf of its university sector and aware of the benefits of global recruitment (which encompasses returning Hong Kong natives and overseas scholars originally from the People's Republic of China), the Hong Kong government's

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.²⁴ 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 Confucian learning – all of which emphasize values other than the purely instrumental or pecuniary – have effectively protected the special administrative region from some of the more damaging attacks on the arts and humanities seen in the West. By the same token, these ideals and principles, most of them widely accepted by those enjoying affluence and power in Hong Kong, provide an environment where the liberal arts – for present purposes, the study of the arts and humanities and the practice of a given art – are given genuine opportunities to develop.

In sum, when it comes to the story of the liberal arts, Hong Kong offers a good deal of hope and inspiration, even in a post-handover era. In Hong Kong, arts-related work is not seen as a form of labor that can be heavily discounted on account of the joys and pleasures of inherently meaningful creative activities or the

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

Mette Hjort is Professor of Film and Screen Studies, and Head of the Lincoln School of Film, Media and Journalism at the University of Lincoln in the United Kingdom. In July 2024, she will return to Hong Kong as Chair Professor at the Education University of Hong Kong. She is the author of *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema* (2005) and the editor of *The Education of the Filmmaker in Europe, Australia, and Asia* (2013) and *Film and Risk* (2012).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The liberal arts are typically defined as encompassing the sciences, as well as the arts, humanities, and fine arts. In this context, I am not concerned with the sciences, which need no valuing or defending in the Hong Kong context, but with arts and humanities subjects and related studio- or performance-based programs.
- ² For a discussion of the “one country, two systems” concept, see William H. Overholt, *Hong Kong: The Rise and Fall of “One Country, Two Systems”* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Kennedy School, 2019), https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/overholt_hong_kong_paper_final.pdf.
- ³ The New Territories is one of the three main regions of Hong Kong, alongside Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula.

- ⁴ See “Our Story,” West Kowloon Cultural District, <https://www.westkowloon.hk/en/our-story> (accessed February 27, 2023).
- ⁵ See “Overview,” West Kowloon Cultural District, <https://www.westkowloon.hk/en/plus#overview> (accessed February 27, 2023).
- ⁶ Each of these movements involved public protests against actions viewed as the Chinese Communist Party’s attempts to control Hong Kong or its government, undermining the One Country, Two Systems concept. The civil disobedience movement of 2014 was a series of street sit-ins that began in response to a decision from the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress regarding proposed reforms to the Hong Kong electoral system, a decision considered to be the CCP’s efforts to screen candidates for the position of chief executive of Hong Kong. The anti-extradition movement of 2019 involved demonstrations held in both 2019 and 2020 against proposed legislation from the Hong Kong government that would allow the chief executive of Hong Kong, on a case-by-case basis, to transfer arrested parties to mainland China. The proposed bill would also have recategorized protests as riots, allowing for more arrests in cases of widespread dissent. The bill was eventually withdrawn. The 2020 National Security Law criminalized terrorism, separatism, and subversion of state power within Hong Kong. Opponents of the law viewed it as antithetical to the One Country, Two Systems principle.
- ⁷ In developing my argument, I draw on my experiences as Head of Department (of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong and, later, of Visual Studies at Lingnan University), Dean of Arts (at Hong Kong Baptist University), and Associate Vice President for Academic Quality Assurance & Internationalization (at Lingnan University), and on the insights afforded by my appointment to the government’s University Grants Committee by the chief executive of Hong Kong. Comparative observations are based on my experiences as a professor at universities in Canada (at McGill University, where I was Head of Film and Communications), Denmark (at the University of Copenhagen, where I was Head of the Film Section in the Department of Communication), and the United Kingdom (at the University of Lincoln, where I am currently Head of the School of Film, Media and Journalism).
- ⁸ Hong Kong’s Education Commission, *Learning for Life, Learning Through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: The Education Commission, 2000).
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ University Grants Committee, “The ‘3+3+4’ New Academic Structure,” <https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/publication/report/AnnualRpt1213/06.pdf> (accessed February 27, 2023).
- ¹¹ See Howard Gardner, “Frequently Asked Questions—Multiple Intelligences and Related Educational Topics” (2013), https://howardgardner01.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/faq_march2013.pdf (accessed February 27, 2023).
- ¹² See Elkana O. Ong’Esa, *The Fourth Dimension*, Artists-in-Residence Program: Exhibition Catalogues at Lingnan University Hong Kong, https://commons.ln.edu.hk/vs_artist_catalogue/2 (accessed February 27, 2023).
- ¹³ See Lai Wai Yi (Monti), *The Color that Remains*, Artists-in-Residence Program: Exhibition Catalogues at Lingnan University Hong Kong, https://commons.ln.edu.hk/vs_artist_catalogue/3 (accessed February 27, 2023).

- ¹⁴ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961).
- ¹⁵ As the initial project coordinator on this bid, I handed this role over to Jeffrey Shaw following the awarding of the grant and my move to the University of Lincoln in the United Kingdom.
- ¹⁶ On the emergence of art tech as a strategic priority for the Hong Kong government, see “CE Unveils Measures to Inject Impetus into Hong Kong’s Economy,” The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Press Releases, November 25, 2020, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202011/25/P2020112500513.htm>.
- ¹⁷ Richard A. Detweiler, *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs: Lives of Consequence, Inquiry, and Accomplishment* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2021).
- ¹⁸ For the mission and vision of the Tin Ka Ping Foundation, see the foundation’s website, <https://www.tinkaping.org/?lang=en> (accessed February 25, 2023).
- ¹⁹ Lingnan University pioneered service-learning in the Hong Kong context. During my term as Associate Vice President for Academic Quality Assurance & Internationalization, Lingnan required all students to take at least one service-learning course before graduating. Lingnan’s Office of Service-Learning aims to enable “students to make a positive impact on society by applying their academic knowledge outside of the classroom.” See “Office of Service-Learning,” Lingnan University, <https://www.ln.edu.hk/osl> (accessed February 27, 2023).
- ²⁰ Andrew Jack, “Eugene Birman’s Russia: Today – A Documentary Opera with an Ear on the Present,” *Financial Times*, January 7, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/2775dc1b-6482-4843-b812-3858c5fda020>.
- ²¹ Amy Gunia, “John Lee is Hong Kong’s New Leader: Here’s What to Know,” *Time*, June 30, 2022, <https://time.com/6191472/john-lee-hong-kong-new-chief-executive>.
- ²² “What Is This Strike About?: A Q&A Primer for Talking to Students and Colleagues,” University and College Union, November 23, 2022, <https://warwickucu.org.uk/what-is-this-strike-about-a-qa-primer-for-talking-to-students-and-colleagues-2>.
- ²³ Elaine Yau, “HK\$200,000 a Month to Lure Top Professors,” *South China Morning Post*, October 18, 2010, <https://www.scmp.com/article/727816/hk200000-month-lure-top-professors>.
- ²⁴ Neal Juster, “Short-Sighted Measures of Graduate Success Are Good for No One,” *Times Higher Education*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/short-sighted-measures-graduate-success-are-good-no-one>.