

Chapter 1

Changing the Imagination of Community Programs at District Councils of Hong Kong

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Projects funded by District Councils (DCs) in Hong Kong in the past have largely involved the provision of bread and circuses for local communities, especially targeting the retired elderly. Indeed, a specific term in Cantonese has been widely used to refer to such DC programs: “snake soup, vegetarian meal, mooncake, sticky rice dumpling” (蛇齋餅粽), indicating that traditional food and meals, associated with specific festivals for the four seasons around the year, would be offered to the elderly in local communities by councilors from the pro-establishment camp, in the hope of winning the votes of the gift-receivers in the next election period. Due to this prevailing bread-and-circuses culture of DCs and the complicated funding application process, local artist groups hesitated to seek funding from DCs in the past. This phenomenon had a change in 2020, after the landslide victory of the pro-democratic camp in the 2019 District Council Election. Most of the newly elected councilors had a strong vision of developing more community programs for civic engagement with more diverse participants in their districts. Many councilors reached out to civic organizations who shared the same vision, including contemporary art groups, to seek creative community project proposals for different DCs at the beginning of their terms in 2020. In response to the enthusiasm in society for community engagement projects with different approaches in the new DCs, contemporary artists who have been practicing art in communities worked together to develop a number of community art projects in different districts. The current essay is going to provide an overview of three art projects funded by DCs in Wong

Tai Sin, Wan Chai and Kowloon City, and discuss challenges and possibilities for further development of DCs' community art programs in the future.

An overview of funding of Community Involvement Projects at District Councils

There are currently 18 DCs in Hong Kong, with a total of 479 District Councillors (452 seats elected and 27 seats appointed). According to the section 61 of the District Councils Ordinance (2020), a DC's functions include making use of available government funds for "the promotion of recreational and cultural activities within the District; and community activities within the District." (sec. 61) Annual funding from the Hong Kong Government for 18 DCs' Community Involvement (CI) Program has been maintained at \$461.6 million since 2017. Each DC receives a different amount, according to its population size. Besides, since 2013, an amount of \$20.8 million per annum has been injected to the CI Program specifically for arts and cultural activities in each DC. As suggested by the program title, CI projects aim at "enhancing community spirit and social cohesion and promoting well-being of the people in the districts." (Hong Kong Government, 2021) Audit Commission (2017) of Hong Kong Government presented an audit report on DC's Community Involvement Projects in 2017:

Audit's analysis of the \$205.63 million of DC-CI funds spent in 2015-16 on the 15 categories of DC projects indicated that \$146.27 million (71%) were spent on the three categories of arts and cultural activities, recreational and sports activities, and festival celebrations and district festivals. For example, each of the categories of civic education (\$2.42 million) and building management (\$1.7 million) incurred a spending of less than 2% of the \$205.63 million...

Data from 2015-2016 showed that DCs downplayed the importance of civic education and other municipal management programs, but gave great support for recreational, art and cultural activities. Nonetheless, the audit report did not indicate to what extent and in what styles or formats communities were involved or engaged in DCs' Community Involvement Programs. The prime concern of the Audit Commission lies in the quantitative amount of participants and expense of the CI projects, instead of the qualitative investigation about different models and approaches applied in the art and cultural activities.

Local tours, dinner gatherings, exhibitions, Cantonese opera performing art shows, games and contests are common formats in CI programs. With an engaging approach, these activities can successfully connect participants. However, most DCs' CI programs from the past were often operated with a one-way communication mode, and lacked expressive platforms for idea exchange among participants. As a result, community groups from the younger generation, with higher education backgrounds or with better financial ability often find it difficult to relate themselves to these bread-and-circuses programs. Despite the negative connotation of the term "snake soup, vegetarian meal, mooncake, sticky rice dumpling" (蛇齋餅粽), it is important to note that, if a more engaging and interactive approach can be applied, food sharing can indeed provide a meaningful opportunity to facilitate constructive dialogues and conversations in communities.

Community Involvement Project in Wong Tai Sin: From Home to Neighborhood

Unlike the funding scheme at Hong Kong Arts Development Council with which local artists are more familiar, DCs' funding does not accept proposals from individual applicants. Artists applying for DCs' fund need to either have their own organizations or to collaborate with other existing ones. Besides facing the challenges caused by the rigid bureaucracy at DCs, artists also had to cope with a lot of uncertainties during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In Wong Tai Sin, art organization, Community Museum Project, applied for a budget around HK\$103,000 from DC for a project titled, *From Home to Neighborhood (Works collecting from Wong Tai Sin Residents)*, to open call for three one-day exhibitions in Chuk Yuen Estate for potted plants, paintings and calligraphy art by the neighbors. Competitions were held during the shows in order to encourage more residents to participate. Community Museum Project (2021) stated in its registration guideline that, "(a)part from traditional criteria on plants, painting and calligraphy appreciation, aesthetic experience, texture of life, community culture and practicality are also valued in the competitions." As such, the application form required applicants to provide work descriptions for evaluation.

In order to better communicate these key concepts to the residents from Chuk Yuen Estate, one of the project's e-poster made use of a photograph of an edible plant taken in a domestic household setting for the open-call of the potted plant exhibition (Figure 1). A pot of green chive flowers standing in front of a wall of tiles with faded colors at a home's balcony is captured as the subject matter in this poster. White and orange barricade fences used to shut off government's sports venues during the

COVID-19 pandemic lockdown appeared in the blurry background at the right top corner of the photo. The very healthy looking green plant in the foreground seemed to be sending out a soothing message, “See how tall I have grown? Don’t be upset about the lockdown. Everything will be alright!” Overlaying the image of chive flowers is a question shown in a handwritten font, asking if the viewer has any edible plants at home. While the edible plant directly implies the practicality of gardening, the healthy green plant amid the lock-down reminded us of the therapeutic quality of gardening. Another e-poster probed a different question, “Does your home have a small garden?” (Figure 2) The text that went along the e-poster in the project’s social media invited the viewers to look up at the windows of Chuk Yuen Estate in order to appreciate the neighborhood garden one might often overlook. The exhibition project did not only encourage residents in Chuk Yuen to showcase the beauty of their potted plants from home, but also connected gardening with the rich texture of everyday life at home with the community’s gardening culture in the neighborhood.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

(Images: Community Museum Project)

From Home to Neighborhood made use of the exhibitions as a platform for sharing and idea-exchanges in the community. The judging process of the competition invited viewers to vote, which in turn encouraged them to discuss their opinions with each other. Although the original plan for art workshops during the exhibition did not take place, due to the crowd-control policy during the pandemic, DIY sections for painting and calligraphy art were set up at the public space outside the exhibition entrance for a smaller group of exhibitors and audience members to experiment with different art media and share their thoughts with each other. It fascinated one of the artist volunteers, Vangi Fong, that many elderly residents in the estate actually had been enrolled in regular art workshops at various community centers, and longed for more in-depth discussion about their artworks with others. Community centers run by social welfare organizations have hosted art exhibitions from time to time. However, according to the neighbor's feedback, exhibitions of *From Home to Neighborhood* was very different from those organized by social workers. One major difference was how art practitioners would treat artworks with a more dedicated attitude and delicate care, and also were more able to develop qualitative dialogues about the artworks with the participants. After all, artists would emphasize aesthetic experience more which helps one to develop from the inside out, while social workers may focus on helping participants to learn more about their social rights which helps one to grasp necessary resources in the external world. Both are necessary for community building.

The original plan of *From Home to Neighborhood* was to take place in November 2020 at a sports venue managed by Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) in Chuk Yuen, but was delayed for two months because of the pandemic. Due to the lack of formal art exhibition space in Chuk Yuen, the Community Museum Project took the opportunity to explore alternatives to make use of LCSD's sports venues, which exist in all Hong Kong districts. Lined up by Wong Tai Sin district councilors, the Community Museum Project had a positive discussion with LCSD staff at the planning stage. During the pandemic, LCSD changed its sports venue usage policy. Under the more serious pandemic situation, all sports venues were shut completely. However, even when the venues were reopened amid the more relaxed social distancing situation, LCSD only accepted reservation for sport games at the venues but refused usage for art exhibition. It is obvious that LCSD failed to recognize the significance of art during the pandemic. While physical exercises are essential to keep one healthy, art provides an important therapeutic outlet during the lock-down. Indeed, many exhibition participants told Vangi Fong that they had been painting and making art at home more than usual in this period. Art-making

helped them both to pass time and to improve their mental wellbeing. In the end, the three one-day exhibitions were held at the office of District Councillor, Mr. Tsz-kin Cheng, which also successfully expanded the imagination about district councillors' offices and encouraged the community members to explore more possible exhibition venues, including their homes and other community spaces.

A Community Involvement Project in Wan Chai: Make a Wish Return

Another art project that focused on aesthetic experience in everyday life was titled *Make a Wish Return: Cookery and Art Practice*, curated by Meito Man to engage the Wan Chai residents in idea exchange and experience sharing about food and community during the pandemic period. Two words, “eat” and “community” were highlighted and connected with a multiplication sign in its poster (Figure 3). Further interpretation of the two words was posted on social media:

The act of eating reveals a kind of integrated culture, which involves different traditions and customs about the process of obtaining ingredients, the processor of cooking, and the usage of eatery utensils. Each community lives residents, who have a lot in common but also differ from each other. The current project attempts to encourage our neighbors to discover and embrace our shared values and differences through looking at the cultures of ‘eating.’

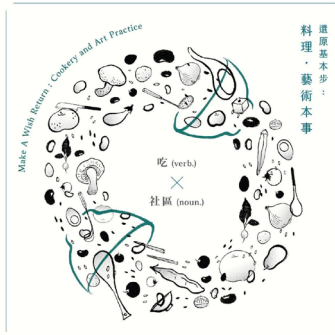


Figure 3.
(Image: Black Moon)

Black Moon, an art organization previously founded by Meito Man, obtained around HK\$99,000 from Wan Chai District Council (WCDC) for the project. While the funding application process was considered smooth for the Community Museum Project, it took Man more than four months to go back and forth with WCDC's secretary to revise the project proposal in order to obtain approval from the secretary and the District Office for the proposal to enter the voting process in WCDC.¹ Some of the recurring questions raised by the secretary included how the project would reveal the characteristics of Wan Chai district, how food and cookery activities actually related to art, and why the cost for video shooting and design tasks was so expensive. It seemed appropriate for the secretary to inquire about the characteristics of Wan Chai during the proposal reviewing process. However, in the past, when local organizations affiliated with the pro-government camp organized Cantonese Opera shows or local tours with WCDCs' funding, all they had to declare was that the programs would be beneficial to Wan Chai residents or those who worked in the district. Indeed, it is impossible to reveal characteristics of contemporary Wan Chai in a traditional Cantonese Opera song. Moreover, a cultural program that does not literally show Wan Chai characteristics can still stimulate Wan Chai residents. This, in turn, will help develop local culture in Wan Chai. What Black Moon went through was actually the tightening process of funding approval by the government as a political gesture to restrict the power of DCs. This was started in mid-2020 with different paces in different districts. One common practice of DCs' secretaries is to repeatedly raise the same set of questions to the applicants, without acknowledging any of their replies, in order to discourage them so much that they eventually withdraw their applications from DCs.

The original proposal by Black Moon sought for more than HK\$200,000, with one major part being to invite visual artists and Wan Chai residents to exchange their recipes, discuss thoroughly the cookery processes and prepare ingredients together for collaborative cooking sessions, and then to film the cooking sessions for online sharing so as to reach more audience during the pandemic period. Meito Man previously curated a similar project about food and microbiotic diet at Oi!, a community art space run by the Art Promotion Office of LCSD. She applied the similar budget for artist and designer fees in the proposal for WCDC, but was told that the cost for all personnel was much higher than the normal rate approved by WCDC in the past. It is true that a lot of DCs have an under-pay budgeting guideline, but exceptions for a higher budget are often made for applications with strong reasons to hire personnel with specialties. For WCDC's secretary, the budget for art projects for art promotion was not an appropriate reference for DC's CI projects, since the

¹Each district's District Council, as a consultancy body, works closely with its district's District Office, which is a government department responsible for municipal management and oversees the financial budget of the District Council.

objective of CI projects was not to pursue or develop professional aesthetic quality.

In the end, Black Moon canceled the collaborative cooking sessions and the filming. The budget was reduced to less than HK\$100,000. The revised proposal of *Make a Wish Return* included: a recipe contest, a guided tour about food ingredients and cuisines found in Wan Chai, a talk on microbiotic diet, a story-telling session about food's stories, a sound-art session with musical instruments made from food and eating utensils, a series of recipe postcards and a community newspaper about food and cookery being distributed in Wan Chai.

Despite the stressful application process, *Make a Wish Return* was successfully launched in February and March 2021, and was well received by the community. For example, participants gave positive feedback to *Guided Tour: Wan Chai X Food X Community* led by artist and researcher Pak-chai Tse. The tour visited different restaurants or food suppliers in the district that featured international cuisines like Portuguese curry, Japanese burger, Italian pasta, French cheese, Nanyang snacks, Cantonese noodle etc. Along the walk, Tse shared stories he collected: how special recipes inherited from the previous generations, the impressive working experience of the chefs around the world, the special meaning of the restaurants' interior design, and also the histories of some well-known restaurants that closed down already. In response to the crowd control policy, each participant held one headphone receiver to listen to Tse's talk transferred from a radio transmitter. Everyone was walking separately and the tour was comparatively quiet, which in turn encouraged more careful observation on the streets. Afterwards, some participants shared their precious memories of the old Lee Tung Street and had discussion about urban renewal development in Wan Chai.

Make a Wish Return had a good mix of participants with different ages: half elderly and half from the middle-aged and student group. Some elderly audience were drawn by the talk about microbiotic diet and healthy living in the first place, but later on also participated in the sound art session and found this art form to be very inspiring and refreshing. Different from commercial cooking programs, *Make a Wish Return*, emphasized exchange among artists and participants. Through sharing and dialogues, everyone in the program learnt to appreciate the detail of each little step of cooking and serving food as an aesthetic experience in daily life. It is not only about the good taste, but is treating food and recipes as an art medium to connect people in a community with different cultural values and the local history.

A Series of Community Involvement Projects in Kowloon City: Shop for Rent

To introduce local history through art workshops was also one major objective of a series of art projects under the framework of *Shop for Rent - Kowloon City Community Art Projects*. One restriction of the funding scheme at Kowloon City DC (KCDC) is the funding ceiling of HK\$18,000 for organizations which are not KCDC's long-term partners. Sharing the same interest in promoting art in Kowloon City, a group of artists and local organizations worked closely together, as a community art cluster, to submit six different art project proposals with one similar theme with which all parties agreed, in order to allow each project to be benefited from the synergy created. Proposed and executed by different organizations, each of these six projects had the same subtitle of *Shop for Rent* and was related to the local history of To Kwa Wan, Kowloon City. The proposals included (1) *Vita the Bus Stop*, a local tour and an signage design workshop about the history of disappearing advertisement signages, (2) *Cheers to Plastic Flowers*, a sculptural art workshop that made use of abandoned plastic materials from factories and shared the local history of factory outworkers, (3) *Furniture Reborn*, an upcycling workshop that reused abandoned furniture and shared the local history of furniture and interior design shops, (4) *Electric Factory for the World*, a sound art workshop that turned electronic devices into musical instruments and shared the local history of electronics factories, (5) *Knit and Recycle*, a knitting art workshop that reconstructed old or abandoned yarn products and shared the history of a yarn shop in To Kwa Wan that closed down in 2017 and (6) *Fun Fun Union* which was about the changing conditions of grassroot labors and the history of open-air markets in Kowloon City. These projects were funded by KCDC for around HK\$18,000 each, except *Vita the Bus Stop* receiving a higher amount of HK\$42,530, because *Vita the Bus Stop* was organized by the Art Together organization which was qualified to apply to be a long-term partner of KCDC. Due to the pandemic, *Cheers to Plastic Flowers* was canceled, but all the others were successfully launched with a smaller number of participants to fulfill the crowd control policy at that moment.

The idea of *Shop for Rent* was inspired by a lot of such signage at the display windows of To Kwa Wan's empty shops. The art groups plan to have a joint documentation exhibition in one of those empty shops in To Kwan Wan in the near future. While all of these projects took the chance to do research and share the local history of To Kwa Wan, *Fun Fun Union* even took it a step further. Besides reviewing the long history of open-air markets at Kowloon City since the 1800s, the leading artist of *Fun*

Fun Union, Luke Ching, observed closely the ecology of nowadays' markets in the district. For example, a lot of styrofoam boxes carrying fresh food to the markets can be completely reused and indeed worth an exchange value. However, the boxes often took up a lot of storage space and the general public may not know how to properly return the boxes for reuse. As such, when stacks of styrofoam boxes are sitting on the side of a street for being picked up, either the hygiene department would receive many complaints about the boxes occupying the street or the boxes would be quickly sent to the landfill. This issue appeared in many different districts all over Hong Kong, but no government department has ever provided solutions in response.

In his research and investigation, Luke Ching discovered there were a few truck drivers who had the incentives to transport styrofoam boxes back to the wholesalers. However, due to the limited capacity of each truck, many styrofoam boxes still could not be properly reused. A better arrangement for logistics is required. Ching also led some participants from the neighborhood to do research in and around the markets to look into issues concerned by the community such as: noise pollution from different shops and the inefficient food waste recycling scheme in and around the municipal market. In the end, Ching offered art workshops to upcycle styrofoam wrapping materials which would be more difficult to recycle, and conducted a seminar and a tour to share the team's research result and possible solutions. Besides local residents, a few district councilors from Kowloon City also joined the sharing. It required coordination among different stakeholders and government departments to improve the recycling system in and around the market. If insights from Luke Ching and his teammates, as the community researchers, can help district councilors to take a step further in their community work, it would be a wonderful further development of the project.

To Connect Internal Aesthetic Experiences with the External

The three art projects reviewed above were all organized by artists in a collaborative manner, with a strong incentive to engage and connect participants for community building. The formats of the projects, at the outlook, may be similar to the "bread-and-circuses" programs by DCs in the past, but each small detail in the projects encouraged participants to learn, think, ask questions, express themselves, or to interact and communicate with others. These details are the keys for community involvement and empowerment. *From Home to Neighborhood* incorporated a democratic voting platform and created a comfortable atmosphere for idea exchanges in its exhibitions. *Make a Wish Return* encouraged Wan Chai residents of all ages to

learn to look into the details of food culture and the district's history, and to explore new art mediums. *Shop for Rent* projects hosted art workshops that specially respond to different recent histories of To Kwa Wan, and also invited participants to help with research in communities. All these were conducted with an artistic approach to connect internal aesthetic experiences with the external communities.

After learning from the farmer in the sharing session of the one-day potted-plant exhibition in *From Home to Neighborhood* about the importance of sunlight, one participant, a retired lady, Ms Lee, did an experiment in the hallway of Chuk Yuen Estate. Sunlight does not reach her apartment much. Indeed, a number of apartment units with the same orientation all have the same problem. What Ms Lee did was to take her potted-plants to the hallway outside her apartment to chase after the fifteen-minute sunlight everyday. She shared the photos of her chasing act on social media as well. On one hand, the problem of the right to sunlight for Chuk Yuen residents became immediately very visible through this poetic act. On the other hand, Ms Lee was making use of the estate's public space for this experiment. Such a chase beautifully exhibited the concept of *From Home to Neighborhood*, which is to connect the private with the public, the individual with the community space, the love for the potted-plants (an internal aesthetic experience) with an external act to make a change, which can eventually lead to the discussion of urban-planning and policy-making (Figures 4-7).

Artists' great sensitivity, careful observation, and creative problem-solving techniques can help provide insights for various community issues, which is perfectly shown in *Fun Fun Union* project and in Luke Ching's art practice in recent years. Such abilities and characteristics are not exclusive to professional artists only though. The projects reviewed in the current essay attempted to show the possibility for anyone to develop these abilities, through a self-empowerment process by connecting his/her own aesthetic experience with the external community space. This can be applied to any mature age group, including the retired ones and the elderly. There, indeed, should not be any stereotype about elderly preferring only Cantonese Opera and bread-and-circuses programs.

The ideal would be to have the empowered community members to initiate different community programs on their own and further share their knowledge with others. District Councils' funding for Community Involvement Programs can play a role here, if the funding mechanism can be improved to support projects with qualitative

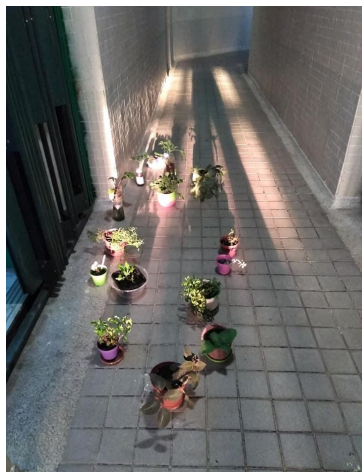


Figure 4.

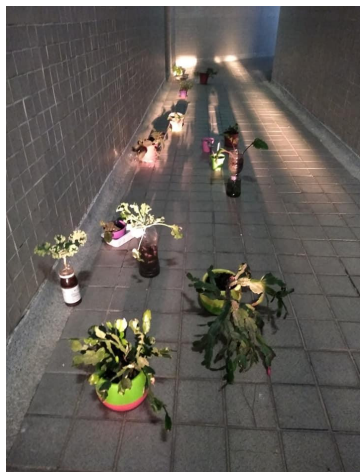


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

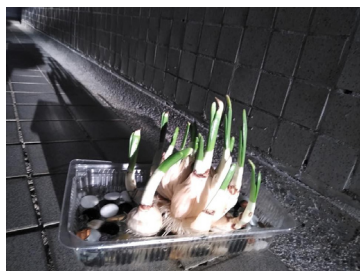


Figure 7.

(Photos: Ms Lee Lai Chun 李麗珍)

engagement approaches and to recognize the importance of aesthetic experience in community programs. Some practical issues include updating the budget guideline to allow reasonable payments for project personnel, increasing more flexibility of venue usages for community activities, and simplifying the funding application process in general. If the government keeps on providing funding for CI projects, then its funding mechanism must be reformed. Despite the pessimistic political situation in Hong Kong, there is no doubt that the meaningful Community Involvement Projects that have been launched have changed their participants' expectations and imaginations of community programs at District Councils. For example, publicity materials for community projects are no longer expected to be "old fashioned," which often neglect the visual details and lack of meaningful hints for further imagination. The responses from the elderly participants in *From Home to Neighborhood* and *Make a Wish Return* clearly show that the aging population in Hong Kong also long for new cultural experiences and intellectual engagements. Luke Ching's research-based artistic practice also nicely provided an alternative example to tackle municipal issues in communities. If more of such community engagement programs can take place, influence on the administrators at DC secretary office and Home Affairs Department would slowly appear, and, thereafter, examples can be set up to justify policy changes in a long run. To make a change with a bottom-up manner in Hong Kong is one of the inevitable front line for the betterment of its civic society.

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