

## Chapter 2

# ***Aestheticisation of Politics: A Conflation of Heritage Revitalisation and Community Arts***

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### **Introduction**

Walter Benjamin introduced the term “aestheticisation of politics” in the 1930s in his analysis on the relation between aesthetics and politics. Benjamin (1969, 19-20) argued that authoritarian power has strongly attempted to aestheticise politics, governing proletarianised masses in an artful way without affecting the existing property relations that the masses struggle to overturn and reset. The outcome of aestheticising politics has not reached the level of war, as Benjamin claimed.

Now in modern society, perception, experience and knowledge can be craftily altered by decentralised agencies when they put “governmentality” in place, which, as Foucault defines it, is “understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (2014, 82). The power of governmentality is not directly exercised through governing policies from the top authority; rather, it is indirectly accomplished by rules and regulations made on a daily basis, causing people to react in a procedural and pre-designed pattern without noticing the changes. Arts administrators and cultural managers in non-government organisations who work with decentralised socio-cultural responsibilities from the authorities are certainly key players in the cultural system that formulates rules and exercises regulatory power in their relation with government, artists and the community. In this sense, governmentality affects artists in creation, production and communication, and the cultural agencies have “agency function” to maintain relatively stable and secure conditions, called homeostasis in Foucault’s writing

(2003, 249), to reach for universal moral goods. Agencies nurture artists for the community, frame arguments and thereby produce communication and knowledge in the constant fluid power relation.

As Peter Drucker (2001, 163), an Austrian management scholar, indicated, managing capacity can be divided into two categories: doing the right thing and doing things right. In this context, agency function refers to the latter in the complex government-artist-community relation because, according to Dreyfus and Rabinow, "People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does" (1982, 187). Cultural agencies in modern society are able to contemplate moral dilemmas and after-effects of policy and regulation in the complex and multilateral relation.

From the variety of consequences, I have investigated the Heritage Revitalisation Scheme in the Hong Kong Central District to articulate the skeleton of aestheticising politics. Would these agencies in the Scheme operate with respect to government-imposed objectives of the Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme: "[t]o preserve and put historical buildings into good and innovative use; to transform historic buildings into unique cultural landmarks; to promote active public participation in the conservation of historic buildings; to create job opportunities in particular at the district level"? Would these non-government agencies manage arts and heritage by creating rules and measures, and, as such, act as the authority? Would there be an artistic director capable of aesthetic communication when encountering participants? And, if so, what are the implications for the nexus between heritage conservation and arts participation in the community? This study offers an original interpretation of the relation between history, aesthetics and artist mentality (personality in practice) through the reciprocal and symmetrical structure of arts and management. The analysis will take a closer look at a new approach - the conflation of heritage revitalisation and art events in public spaces for the community.

### **Distinctive Historical Gaze**

A cultural system, in a particular place and a particular time, has its own boundaries with historical, aesthetic and political perceptions in the social realm. In the last century, colonial sovereignty in Hong Kong did not exercise power over the colonised by affirming its dominion over property rights and public spaces. People encountered commercial theatres and movie houses along main streets, highly visible in the public culture. Public parks and squares were free and accessible for all. Free-

<sup>1</sup> Passive acceptance in the regime of arts was embedded in the positive non-interventionism that cultural policies were exercised by relatively pro-active practices with "just right" support without coercive restriction in the absence of official interpretation and recognition.

to-air television and radio broadcasting systems were available in the 1960s, some of which presented controversial ethnic and social issues in addition to entertainment. Tsang Tsou-choi (a.k.a. King of Kowloon) created graffiti in the form of calligraphy in the 1960s and this was acceptable to the colonial government.

The approach was sovereign juxtaposition, mingling the passive acceptance<sup>1</sup> and inclusion of Chinese local culture and customs to consider people's "progress" in (Western) cultural values by virtue of consent and inattention. The colonial government even allowed an evasive attitude in daily entertainment, religion, and art preferences, as long as the colonial needs for political life were confined and consumed in their cultural life. In other words, the government surrendered regulatory practices in public spaces to increase freedom and autonomy for proletariats and thus compensate for their limited property rights and circumscribed political life.

Heritage conservation in those days merited conversation; the focus was on accessibility for all and for future generations in ways to celebrate colonial governance in socio-cultural contributions. For instance, the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware (1984) in Admiralty was made open to the public, and the exhibit was a rational choice, since tea ware had become the most popular merchandise between China and European countries since the 17th century. In its own logic of accessibility, the Ping Shan Tang Clan Gallery cum Heritage Trail Visitors Centre (1993) emphasised historical and architectural significance, not only a single point of the building, but rather covering the features of the entire district, taking into account its dynamic and complex historical and cultural factors. The Old Stanley Police Station (2002)<sup>2</sup> revealed a trail of public-private partnership by transforming itself into a supermarket, and the corporate became a cultural agent for revitalisation. With the logic of accessibility applied to government/business cultural entrepreneurship, the experience of seeing objects was put in conjunction with touching the materials of objects, and accessibility was expanded to authenticity; this aesthetic experience created greater impact and understanding in everyday life.

### **Obligations and Effects of the Heritage Revitalisation Policy**

On the threshold of the post-colonial period, people live in a new century of cultural demands that collide with the developing changes of property rights and economic policies. When the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance was on the agenda for review shortly after 2000, even with years of debate over its power and responsibilities,

<sup>2</sup>The Old Stanley Police Station partnered with Welcome (惠康) from 2002 to 2018, and Park'n Shop (百佳) from 2018 to the present.

the review was terminated in 2004. One factor involved was the concept of cultural economy, which promised successful global cities especially through cultural tourism, which largely depended on low-skilled labor. In 2003, Henry Tong Ying-yen (唐英年) led the Tourism Strategy Group to draw on the experience of New York and other metropolitan cities, in the hope of branding “landmark districts” which featured shopping, food and culture. Lan Kwai Fong was considered an emblematic success and the next testing ground would have been an adjacent project, covering the former Central Police Station, Central Magistracy and Victoria Prison in the Central District (*Wen Wei Po*).

Added to this major momentum, policies were immediately enforced in 2004. “We are proceeding with heritage tourism projects at the former Marine Police Headquarters, and the Central Police Station, Victoria Prison and the former Central Magistracy Compound” (2004 Policy Address, 8). However, the government did not live up to the expectations of the arts sector by placing the Antiquities and Monuments Offices (AMO) under the Development Bureau in 2007, relocating it from the power line for the public culture to the master plan of economy. The transition concluded with the establishment of AMO’s Expert Panel - an advisory board at best.

It might be said that AMO’s authority had been isolated from gaining legislative power for recurrent resources and execution authority in heritage conservation. The effect of this deployment began an adverse history of heritage conservation; the HoTung Garden became a failed case in 2012. To the detriment of historical and cultural integrity only trifling parts of King Yin Lei, Haw Par Mansion and Garden were merely conserved. Monuments were set upon the bargaining table between the government and landlords, where the government seemed to place preference to austerity, instead of “redeeming” the heritage whose market value had been soaring under the high land price policy.

There was less temptation to blame the fate of historical sites and the loss of organic activities in communities, as people were prone to discuss arts and cultural enterprises for revitalisation schemes. This public-private partnership went uncontrolled into the dire predicament of fervent protest against the demolition of the Lee Tung Street (1918-2004) in the Wanchai District, followed by another protest for Queen’s Pier (1954-2007) and Star Ferry Terminal (1957-2007) in the Central District.

Revenge for socio-cultural justice began with explicit utterances in the heritage conservation movement that questioned postcolonial government visions. As the

year 2007 began, another batch of heritage revitalisation projects unfolded. The Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (2008), PMQ (2014), and Taikwun (2018) were transformed into cultural use from a factory estate, the Police Married Quarters, and the Compound of Central Police Station, Victoria Prison and the Central Magistracy, respectively. These projects were linked to the belief that the expression and reflection of arts and culture ought to be rooted in an all-embracing condition, and intended to provoke local cultural interests for economic interests, presenting new revitalisation projects as positive steps that were beyond dispute in the process of decentralisation for arts and cultural services.

### **Role and Effect of Community Arts in Heritage Sites**

Community arts, in the context of the massive revitalisation plan of a political centre in Central District, refers to the theme of a continuous history tied to colonial governance and to the task of reprise. To conflate artistic ideas and colonial buildings is to question in historical and aesthetic terms how the meaning of art is presented for public negotiation and participation. What, then, provoked these conservation and revitalisation plans? The commingling of heritage and arts produced three confirmations of aesthetic politics that Benjamin, Bourdieu and Foucault indicated. These include Benjamin's aura of arts in the realm of authenticity and Bourdieu's aesthetic judgment that assails the belief that artists' autonomy is related to arts and cultural institutions. These two perceptions suggest a third stance: that the master revitalisation plan in the Central District brings cultural agents to the attention of Foucault's regulatory power.

First, the current concern with the power of heritage revitalisation cannot be simplified in the way presented and confused with insufficient knowledge in cultural management. If we examine Benjamin's concept of auratic art and its link to history, the cult value of art is conditional upon the context of tradition that "bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject" (Benjamin 2002, 103). At the very least, the faded past and the lost beauty claim their place by being "discontinuous", making room in the cultural imagination for artists and community members to produce consensual truths through the art. This historical and aesthetical constructed auratic art has the power to penetrate into our understanding for in-depth reflection because of its sense of authenticity (地道).

In both the Taikwun and PMQ revitalisation plans, the sites have been overshadowed by an imposed exhibition value, the focus falling, instead, on the role of culture

capital in the establishment of referentiality. Within such an arrangement, stories of policemen and criminals, crimes and punishments, misjudged cases, and such significant socio-cultural changes as the first death sentence of a woman in the Central District magistracy were enveloped. As in the case of Haw Par Villa, the Chinese belief in reincarnation and teaching with spices of Indian and Nanyang (南洋) decorations in its Tiger Palm Garden were demolished, leaving the mansion to represent and rewrite the whole. This is true for many of these heritage sites. They have become sterilized colonial mansions with sheer exhibition value, leaving nothing for contemplation, and reducing the auratic and experimental spectrum of the arts created on their premises.

Second, our postcolonial artistic vision and aesthetic perception can fall far short of modernity without the security of property rights. As Bourdieu (1984, 4) indicated, “[a]esthetic perception is necessarily historical, inasmuch as it is differential, relational, attentive to the deviations (*ecarts*) which make styles.” If colonial history possesses content and meaning for art and cultural events, aesthetic perception plays a role for rationalising “difficult” history into the production of consensual truths for postcolonial societies. Thus the Australian government intervened into the revitalisation of the Fremantle Lunatic Asylum and Melbourne Abbotsford Convent, both of which have been redeveloped into community arts centres (Darian-Smith 2019).

A diverse practice was learnt from Times Square, wherein the government revitalised the public market place and the tram terminal with the help of commercial enterprises. However, barely any part of the plan ever came to fruition. The South China Morning Post reported (Zhao 2018) that Times Square was accused of private ownership of public space and expelling artists with its managing and disciplinary power.

An even more complex case occurred in Heritage 1881, which was transformed from the Marine Police Headquarters in 2003 into a “district landmark” through the partnership with Cheung Kong Holdings. This property company tried in vain to create a shopping mall and hotel that would emanate cultural value. What was missing in this idea of heritage conservation through arts and culture? The owner of the public space had a direct relation to the aesthetic perception; in fact, the most controversial argument about the relation between heritage revitalisation and the arts was the ownership of the public space for community aspirations, an issue which had been overlooked.

Ownership of property here refers to the rights of usage, exclusive rights to derive income, and free alienable rights, at the direction of economist Steven N. S. Cheung (1983). As people hoped to show, PMQ and Taikwun came into play with a new *raison d'être*: a charity-led agency would be accountable for the community and artists' autonomy rather than swallowed up by plutocrats. Indeed, we might expect that from the notion of heritage revitalisation, what makes art a stimulus is artists' interpretation of historical and cultural meanings of the heritage site. It is questionable whether PMQ and Taikwun exhibited a test of immediacy, facilitating short-term, project-based and ad hoc commissions to implement quantitative measures of their accomplishments. In particular, the sites were branded into a cultural landmark with a sheer focus on "aesthetic-less" participation, randomizing artists' usage rights, shaping the artist-agency relation in an intermittent manner and managing artistic personalities to prioritize short-term fruitions although not through compliance with custom and aesthetic tradition. The central question is if the cultural agents tended to surrender the nature of the creative process, which is based largely on non-immediacy and reciprocal dependency between aesthetic communication and artistic interpretation, for their own institutional interests.

### **Function and Power of Cultural Agency**

Third, the answers given to these questions correlate with Foucault's idea of regulatory power where examination and leadership lie. A basic key to understanding power and accountability of cultural agency is its capacity for the teacher-disciple relation and shepherd-sheep relationship (2021, 85-86). It seems increasingly critical to construct thought-provoking relationships with continuous explorations and aspirations. Foucault defines this teacher-disciple bonding as a form of ephemeral obedience relation, -a "momentary dependence" (2021, 93) in fluid structure to ensure that the teacher and the disciple give each other power over themselves.

The working experience of an artistic director is a prime example of teacher-disciple relation. Ballet legend, Mikhail Baryshnikov, the former artistic director of the American Ballet Theater explored this relationship with a metaphor: the "examination of watermelon". Though the watermelon sounds deep when thumped, it can still have a hollow heart. Though artist selection is not what the director had expected, the role of teacher uses a tailored means to bring out the quality in disciples, and the obedience (relation) starts with examination and is followed by leadership in their necessary alliance. This obedience relation is productive and holds the greatest potential for venturing into experimental depth for artistic breakthrough

and transmitting knowledge in the continuity of history and tradition.

The establishment of a meadow of salvation for artists, which is necessarily indirect leadership, has become a challenge for cultural agents. This requires agents to function with a gaze of surveillance that is personalised for resident artists in heritage sites, to strive to expand artists' personalities without excessive force, and frame their styles for the understanding of community members. That is to say, there is a socio-culturally constructed condition to lead creative impulses and cultural insights for aesthetic communication in their reciprocal relation. What makes this condition crucial for arts and cultural encounters? The agent function creates an aura where artists are able to become sensitive through the history of the site and view themselves and their community in modern times.

In the shepherd-sheep relation, the leader is he who forgoes this auratic condition to initiate the invention and authenticity. An artistic director can be the leader in this relation, but it takes more than that. The shepherd-sheep relation embodies metaphorical results of the birth of Tanztheater at the time of the 1968 revolts. The reception of Pina Bausch's Tanztheater was not an accident; it was the consequence of non-immediacy in the communication and negotiation among artists, critics and property owners in the society. At the time Pina was conducting experiments in the binary genres of heritage art and melodrama, Jochen Schmidt emerged as her life-time critic, safeguarding and interpreting the German style, standing out from the spreading impact of the American contemporary dance genre (Schmidt 1997, Backcover). At the same time, Arno Wüstenhöfer, the theatre manager of Wuppertaler Bühnen (1964 – 1977), offered Pina a ritual space, the Wuppertal Tanztheater, in 1973 and secured her creative vision from the critical challenge of patrons and audiences. This took about 20 years, and this rationalisation process might have easily been upset by overemphasis on commercial measures.

When we consider the public square in PMQ or Taikwun as the meadows of salvation for sheep, do we consider that artists are being examined for their historical sensitivity in "difficult" sites? Does a barren hole frame our feeble perception of the postcolonial style? Since the new forms of friction were geared to marketing techniques and promoting strategy without historical testimony and artistic personality, we may witness boundaries to artists' deeper aesthetic communication, limiting their exploration into the hollowed out heritage sites, or even worse, directing them into socio-cultural emptiness.

The security of heritage history, use rights of public spaces, and ongoing aesthetic communication (friction) have been an interwoven challenge for cultural agencies. The conflation of heritage revitalisation and art enhances aesthetic experiences by the very fact of the cultural value created, no matter how small, and the ownership rights for artistic direction. This commingling would otherwise be dreadful and run the risk of the aestheticisation of politics--the ultimate concern--that is linked to the accountability of decentralized cultural agencies/institutions, thus deterring freedom of auratic art creation and freedom of expression in the course of aesthetic "friction". In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin focuses on dictatorial power: "[s]ee its salvation in granting expression to the masses--but on no account granting them rights" (1969, 121). He was responding to the prominent ideology raised by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2004, 66) that states:

[T]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. Creative force dries out, converge, and proselytise in the pursuit of popularisation.

Aestheticising politics consumes freedom by means of procedural regulations, giving artistic freedom of expression without affecting the existing power structure, ownership of space, domination of examination and leadership. However, the secret of examination and leadership is not in inventing excessive power over the movement of sheep in the meadows where cruel shepherds maintain watch. For Nikolas Rose, the agencies can become a social gaze (1999, 114), accountable to the ruling class and lopsided to invent cruel "knowledge" of regulations. It is not the examination and leadership that is the problem: it is the degree and constancy of power exercised over the artists in question.

## **Conclusion**

In Hong Kong, the consequence diverges from the universal measure, not creating an accumulation of history and aesthetic tradition, with which aesthetic experience and communication may be enshrined but rather sacrificing them in the aestheticisation of politics. In the context of Hong Kong's decolonisation, understanding the

aestheticisation of politics enables the cultural agencies to be conscious of the effects of policies, from which rules and regulations proceed in a linear fashion. As the potential negation of aesthetic experience and cultural democracy, certain deployment comes in parallel with the freedom of expression, artistic autonomy and art perception of the community members can be seized with the control over historical gaze, property rights and aesthetic experience in the public space.

Of course, there are tensions between the freedom of decentralised agencies and rules for creative artists as Hong Kong transitions from its colonial characteristics to a post-colonial uncertainty. The best way to arrive at a practical possibility of heritage revitalisation with arts and culture, I suggest, is to examine Walter Benjamin's aestheticisation of politics and to proceed by means of Foucauldian analysis on agential power. While arts administrators and cultural managers are part of the ruling class in the cultural system, their sensitivity to historical and cultural vitality should not be hindered to an enthusiastic extent by regulation. Their dualistic accountabilities to the authority and the community remind us, first of all, to engage with possibilities for the correlation of tradition and its modern interpretation in the community arts and then to engage with complex and multilateral socio-cultural interests for human potentialities of aesthetic knowledge in modern society.

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