## **Chung Ying Theater**

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Abstract

Cultural theorist François Colbert once stated in his book, "concept such as profit, per-share profit and market share should have no relevance for non-profit organization with a social and education mission. Rather, the appropriate performance-measurement criteria must be centered on the achievement of the organization mission."

Chung Ying Theater, being one of the nine major performing arts groups subsidized by Hong Kong Home Affair Bureau, sets out its organization missions to be *community* inclusive: that is to *connect people from all walks of life*; to *enliven the cultural life of the community*; to promote art of drama. Looking at their development plan and effort made within the community in recent years, it is not difficult to realize their bigger vision is to position Chung Ying as the *theater empowered by community* and to achieve *Cultural Empowerment* through drama. This paper aims to discuss and critically evaluate Chung Ying Theater in the aspects of branding, marketing and audience building strategies. To ride on Colbert's thought, this paper will not take, or merely take number as the evaluation parameters, which also means, whether Chung Ying is doing good or not is not the main focus of this paper, but more meaningfully, to share a brief overview on how these strategic aspects come to achieve and contribute to its organization missions.

Keywords

Chung Ying Theater, Marketing, Branding, Audience building, Strategies

#### Introduction

The Chief Executive's Policy Address in 2008 has indicated future's cultural directives as:

To tie in with the West Kowloon Cultural District development, we need to enhance our software by promoting cultural activities in the *community* and tapping into cultural consumption markets. To bring more cultural activities into *local communities*, the Government will encourage cultural and performing arts groups to stage performances across the territory.<sup>2</sup>

The word *community* is mentioned twice within this one thought. But how true and relevant is this thought actualized and implemented within the community?

In 2008, Artistic Director of Chung Ying Theater, Ko Tin Lung commented, "Arts in Hong Kong are serving the middle class." (「香港的文化藝術是為中產階層服務的。」) <sup>3</sup>. It seems to suggest there is a huge gap between policies stated on paper and the actualization of it. And this explains the motivation behind the mission statement for Chung Ying to be *community* inclusive: that is to *connect people from all walks of life*; to *enliven the cultural life of the community*; to promote art of drama.

Ko further elaborated his vision by reinforcing the need to position Chung Ying as *the theater empowered by community*. "I believe theater stage is for everyone, no matter it is a collective memory of a society or a personal story, they all deserve a voice to be heard, this is what I called *Cultural Empowerment*". <sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to discuss and critically evaluate Chung Ying Theater in the aspects of branding, marketing and audience building strategies. And why is this important to understand the company

<sup>3</sup> The Hong Kong Council of Social Service newsletter, CSR Vol 4, 2008

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Culture Policy, 2008-2009 Chief Executive Policy Address.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Chung Ying Educational Press 2013/14 (www.chungying.com/about/periodicaldetails/educational\_press)

mission before we evaluate? Colbert <sup>5</sup> once stated in his book, "concepts such as profit, per-share profit and market share should have no relevance for non-profit organization with a social and education mission. Rather, the appropriate performance-measurement criteria must be centered on the achievement of the organization mission."

Riding on Colbert's thought, this paper will not take, or merely take number as the evaluation parameters, but more importantly, it will evaluate the branding, marketing and audience building strategies in achieving the brand mission.

#### **Branding**

In evaluating branding, it is critical to acknowledge that "A brand is not a logo; it is not a label. A brand carries meaning and associations. It taps into emotions. It is a symbol of trust between the organization and the customer. Brands are social, as they represent ideas that people have in common." <sup>6</sup>

So Chung Ying as a brand, how well has it socializes and connects with the people in the community? Being an art group that has been around for 35 years old, Chung Ying has always prided itself on its long establishment in Hong Kong, as well as its emotional bonding with the community through the years.

Let's take a look at the artistic note and slogan Chung Ying have been using through the years: in 2008, the artistic director's note from Ko was "it was the worst of time, it was the best of time,", quoted from Charles Dickens, that was when financial tsunami took place and Hong Kong was at a difficult time, it anchored on the close bonding of Chung Ying with Hong Kong people. "We share moving and inspiring moments" was used in 2009's annual report <sup>7</sup>, and "35 years on, Keep Going Strong" is used in 2014. <sup>8</sup> Their artistic motives are always welcoming and inclusive, also sentimentally resonating with the society, the perception of Chung Ying being a brand that bond closely with the community is reinforced.

Another interesting aspect of branding to look at is brand identity. Their logo has remained the same for the past 35 years – the use of classical Chinese calligraphy typography of the two words "Chung Ying" in Chinese. It even incorporated "since 1979" into the brand logo to reinforce its long history.

One may question then, will this "historical yet classic" manifestation undermine other important brand attributes and personalities, such as the need to stay in touch of the *current*, to approach art with *refreshing* artistic perspective and the need to feel and be *energetic*?

Edmond Lo, the Associate Artistic Director of Chung Ying Theater, stated strongly during an interview that "one major challenge Chung Ying faces now is the disconnection with mass audiences, particularly among the younger group, these audiences find Chung Ying old-fashioned and not a brand they will engage or associate with. Compared to groups like W Theater and Kearen Pang Theater, we are not connecting with them enough." <sup>9</sup>

How about giving the current logo a fresh new look, replacing classic calligraphy to a contemporary font and graphic? A good reference is found with the Hong Kong Philharmonic. In 2010, it replaced their old logo in use for 30 years. The philosophy behind the new brand identity, as declared in its company website, was "to represent the swinging movements of the baton in the hand of the conductor as if it were a wand in the hand of a wizard, creating and orchestrating magical experiences that are at once elevating, enriching and enchanting. Hong Kong Philharmonic steps into a new tomorrow, and promises new movements in symphonic endeavor." It is difficult to judge if HKPO's objective is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Colbert, F., 16, 116; 'artistic vision', 8-9; board of directors as 'fundamental entity', 94-5; *Marketing culture and the Arts*, 6, 134; not-for-profit and contestation over agenda, 96

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Joanne Scheff Bernstein (2006) Arts Marketing Insights: The Dynamics of Building and Retaining Performing Arts Audiences. Kotler, N.J.L Wiley, p.194

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Chung Ying Theater Annual Report 2009/10 (www.chungying.com/about/periodicaldetails/annual report)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Chung Ying Theater Annual Report 2013/14 (www.chungying.com/about/periodicaldetails/annual\_report)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Writer's interview with Edmond Lo on 21/11/2014, Hong Kong

<sup>10</sup> HKPO website (www.hkphil.org/eng/aboutus/the\_logo/)

achieved, however, what is true is that this new move was not too welcomed by musicians and loyal fans; some fans even set up a Facebook page to urge HKPO to bring back the old one. 11

And how about brands like McDonald's and Coca-Cola? Their brand identity has always been the Golden Arches M and the two signature wavy C, and yet the two brands are never out of style or disconnected with the current mass audiences. Why is that?

It should not be overlooked that branding comprises many tangible and non-tangible elements, such as pricing, distribution, quality, presence, awareness, reputation, image, benefits, preference, share of market and customer commitment...etc. Brand identity represents just the awareness, reputation and image aspect of a brand.

Chung Ying manages to preserve its brand identity for 35 years and no doubt such familiar face gives tremendous historical value and mileage for the brand. What begs the question is perhaps the bigger challenge of how it can be translated into timeless brand property like McDonald's and Coca-Cola do, an identity that will continue to resonate with the present and future customers?

Philip Kotler, in his book Marketing Insight from A to Z, stated, "Don't advertise a brand; live it." Live it through every method with which you communicate with your publics, from your advertising to the style and quality of your direct-mail publics and website, to the way ushers and box office personnel relate to your customers, and of course, to the quality and consistency of the work on your stages."

Joanne Scheff Bernstein elaborated," The power of a brand is demonstrated in the extent to which it brings people together for a common purpose – to share in and experience or to buy the same thing – while being personally relevant." <sup>13</sup>

What Bernstein and Kotler mentioned above has one thought in common, that is, the necessity to place audiences in the position where they can *live* and *experience* the brand, that would not be achievable without considering the 7Ps.

To summarize, Chung Ying as a brand manages to preserve and associate with the historical and social sentiment with the community in the past, but it is questionable if it is still able to connect audiences with the brand experience that resonates at present and in future. And that would lead to the evaluation of the second part of this paper – marketing strategies, which should play a critical role in bringing such brand experience alive.

## Marketing

In reviewing the marketing strategies, the parameters will be how well the brand provides experience around the 7Ps - Promotion, Product, Place, Physical Evidence, Position Pricing, People - in connection with the organization mission of: to promote the art of drama and if their "product" can enliven cultural life of the communities.

#### Promotion of "communicated with"

Technology advancement not only changes the pace but also the way information is being shared, it also changes the way people socialize and connect, and the manipulation of cultural life in the communications.

"The Internet, other advances in technology, and globalization have combined to create a new economy. The old economy was built on managing industries; the new economy is built on managing information." <sup>14</sup>

<sup>11 &</sup>quot;Bring Back The Previous HKPO Logo" (www.facebook.com/BringBackThePreviousHkpoLogo)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Philip Kotler, Marketing Insights from A to Z (Hoboken, N.J.L Wiley 2003), p.9 Joanne Scheff Bernstein (2006) Arts Marketing Insights: The Dynamics of Building and Retaining Performing Arts Audiences. Kotler, N.J.L Wiley 2006), p.194

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"People don't want to be marketed to, they want to be *communicated with*." <sup>15</sup>said Flint McGlaughin, the Managing Director of MECLABS Institute.

Two buzz words, *information* and *communicated with* from the above quotes, both indicate the existence of a new dialogue between advertisers and consumers, and that would be *content that can be shared and socialized*.

Kotler, Jain, and Maesincee said in their book *Marketing Moves*, "Business needs to be shifting from focusing on products to focusing on the customers. This requires shifting the marketing mindset from make-and-sell to *sense-and-respond*, from mass markets to markets of one, and from seasonal marketing to *real-time marketing*." <sup>16</sup>

Chung Ying probably is the first few art performing groups that realize and embrace this *sense and respond* strategies. In 2012, they successfully won the supporting grant from "Contestable Funding Pilot Scheme" granted by Home Affairs Bureau. Immediately, they commenced a "Chung Ying Online" project to set up a multimedia interactive digital promotion platform.

Out of the 1000 performing art groups in Hong Kong, Chung Ying is the first and only one to launch a branded APP. The APP not only provides timely promotion of programs and workshops, it also makes multi-media content feasible, like video of behind the screen, tailor-made discount notifications. It also allows sharing and socializing of content in connection with user's own personal social platform such as Facebook. One competitive advantage APP possesses but not other social media channels like Facebook or Twitter can enable is personalized loyalty programme. This APP connects with Chung Ying existing membership "CY Buddies" (now re-named as "Energy Fun Club Plus") to introduce a bonus loyalty programs as a draw to build audience base. It also allows other customization functions such as user can mark the show date onto its own calendar, making the engagement more personal and audience-friendly. Last but not least, it also allows audiences to fill out the show questionnaire on the APP anytime anywhere at their wish, which is a breakthrough from current paper format.

The launch of the APP is a great bullet, but without pulling the trigger to download it onto the phone, it is still useless, and that is what Chung Ying has not done enough. After the APP is introduced in June 2014, they simply rely on front of house and existing Facebook page, which has only 2,600 fans so far, with 3-4 posts every day to promote the APP. There is no prominent mentioning of the APP on their website front page, nor on traditional promotional material like leaflets and program booklet. As a result, the exposure is not optimized. This is truly a big loophole in its marketing strategies.

Having say so, Chung Ying's intention of creating the APP is still commendable. APP creates a more personalized and upgraded brand experience for the community, both geographical and digital communities. It also provides access and platform for public to engage and connect with arts and interact with the brand on everyday basis.

# Product of experience that redefines Place

Marketing expert C.K. Prahalad and Venkatram Ramaswamy stated, "Now the scene has changed, and business competition seems more like the experiential theater of the 1960 and 1970s; everyone and anyone can be part of the action... that dialogue is no longer being controlled by corporations... Consumers can now initiate the dialogue; they moved out of the audience and onto the stage." <sup>17</sup>

Nowadays, performing art groups should not only consider their "product" (performance) on a specific "place" (theater stage), with customers moving out of the audiences seats and go on stage, as well as the merge of real and virtual world, the experience created around the "product" is no long restricted by the geographical "place". This opens up lots of rooms for art performing group to trigger the theatrical experience at any time and any place.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Flint McGlaughin's statement cited from Museum Marketing Tops, Motivational Quotes: Marketing and Advertising, retrieved from <a href="http://www.museummarketingtips.com/quotes\_ac.html">http://www.museummarketingtips.com/quotes\_ac.html</a>

<sup>16</sup> Kotler, Jain, and Maesincee, *Marketing Moves*, p. 36

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> C.K. Prahalad and Venkatram Ramaswamy, "Co-Opting Customer Competence," in *Harvard Business Review on Customer Relationship Management* (Boston: Harvard Business Scholl Press, 2001), pp. 2-5

Pine and Gilman even suggest to "go beyond what people expect by staging the unexpected. It means arousing customer surprise by staging memorable experience." Referring to the world of business, "companies must realize that they make *memories*, not goods." 18

In recent performance of Chung Ying "Spring Fever Hotel", they do more to create the theatrical experience at front of house by dressing up their lobby with hotel setting so that audiences can feel like living inside the show before the performance. This created a level of excitements and let its audiences warm up for the mood of the show. Also, instead of just using programme booklet to promote their upcoming shows, performers act out the preview on stage before the curtain is up, audiences feel like watching a move-trailer on stage, thus the anticipation and excitement are enhanced.

#### New face through Physical Evidence

Memories can be and should be co-created with physical evidence, as Zeithaml pointed out "The physical environment is the space by which you are surrounded when you consume the service. The physical environment is made up from its ambient conditions; spatial layout and functionality; and signs, symbols, and artefacts." 19

Edmond Lo said during the interview, "We want to show the public a new refreshing face of Chung Ying which are more approachable and energetic. That's why we change the design direction in our communication and advertisement. We added neon and shiny colors into our branded communications, like website, brochure, Facebook and APP...etc. Even the way we photograph our artist is different, the expression is more casual and personal, less staged, the photos will compliment with the splash of colors, this is how we want our audiences to perceive Chung Ying – more energetic and youthful". <sup>20</sup>

"In the past, we will just describe what the story is about in our ads, now the reading habit of our audiences have changed, we have to change the way we communicate and promote our show. The tonality will be more personal and casual, using buzz word that resonates with the audiences. Display of impactful visual to impress audience at their first glance." said Edmond

Rejuvenating the brand with fresher and more personal brand image does help to connect audiences and probably resonates better. However, if Chung Ying's mission is to enliven the cultural life of the community, its positioning has to go hand in hand with this thought.

## Position with resonating motives

In the seasonal brochure of Chung Ying 2013, Ko Tin Lung declared, "This year, CY has to Sync. with HK!" <sup>21</sup>(「今年, CY 要 Sync. HK!」) Using the digital buzz word of "Sync" as their 2013 artistic note, it declares their motivation to not only be synchronized with the pace of Hong Kong people, but to *upgrade* the cultural mentalities and qualities of Hong Kong through promoting drama.

Furthermore, in response to the negative and pessimistic social sentiments in Hong Kong, in 2014, Chung Ying evolves the artistic motive to "Humour explosion" (「笑爆你」), at the same time, it renames its loyalty club from "Chung Ying Buddies" to "Energy Fun Club Plus", with the intention to promote positive energy through drama to Hong Kong mass. In terms of programming, it brings back series of classic Chung Ying's comedic performances from the past and revitalizes it with new ensemble and performers.

These artistic motives unquestionably give a more vibrant and contemporary translation to Chung Ying's artistic positioning; also it resonates and amplifies empowerment of Chung Ying mission to enliven the cultural life of community through drama.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*. p. 100

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Zeithaml, Valarie A. (2000), "Service Quality, Profitability, and the Economic Worth of Customers: What We Know and What We Need to Learn," Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 28 (1), 67–85. Writer's interview with Edmond Lo on 21/11/2014, Hong Kong

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Chung Ying Theater Seasonal Brochure 2013 (www.chungying.com/about/periodicaldetails/seasonal brochure)

### Pricing that harmonized

Bernstein stated in her book, "All elements of the marketing mix- product, price, promotion, place and people – should be congruent for each offering. The ticket prices must be harmonious with the organization's reputation, the stature of the artists, the quality of the hall, and the communicated messages themselves." <sup>22</sup>

To embrace the idea of "CY has to Sync. with HK!" Chung Ying's pricing strategy also reacted to this thought, Ko explained in his artistic note, "nowadays, things are getting more expensive, thanks to inflation, many audiences reflected that they really can't afford to buy a drama ticket even they have the urge and interest. So, if CY has to upgrade Hong Kong people, we will then downgrade the price, minimize the barrier that may hinder audiences to come, but not compromising our artistic values and production qualities. This is how we "Sync" with Hong Kong".

### People not alienating

"Championing marketing in the arts can mean overcoming a considerable amount of internal resistance from colleagues (and superior) who see it as an exploitive and unethical process serving materialist ends. Arts marketing – it is often misconstrued as sales orientation rather than a strategic discipline: 'it's the marketing department's job to sell what the artistic director decides."

Instead of separating the roles and responsibilities of artist and marketing managers, Chung Ying took a bold step to resolve this challenge through changing the operation structure. In 2010, Chung Ying created a new position of Associate Artistic Director, hiring Edmond Lo and tasking him with the responsibilities of both *administrative management* and *artistic development* of the company. Edmond said, "The two roles function in two different extremes, one encourages freedom of artistic thoughts, another one demands control and practical implementations. It could be quite schizophrenic sometimes, but it also gives me authority to take a more holistic perspective on managing the growth Chung Ying Theater in a longer and sustainable manner without comprising the merit in both sides."

And what Chung Ying put in place for their people strategy? They take a very literal approach to put "their people" (i.e. the actor and actress) in the focus of their marketing. Edmond said, "one successful factor of W Theater and Kearen Pang workshop is that the founder/actors/actress market themselves as the brand, they transform themselves to be the icon and celebrity via expanding their popularity beyond the field of arts, he or she could be a writer who writes books about cooking, a skincare brand endorser, a blogger, a cultural and multi-media figure at the same time. Their popularity is able to attract those who have never considered going into theater to give it a first try. I think that could be one way Chung Ying can explore to markets their people to cultivate a new audience base."

What is interesting about this thought is the blurring definition between artist and entertainer/star. It seems to suggest that art and commerce should no longer alienate each other. Then, will such people strategy make Chung Ying look more commercialized and less cultural? Shouldn't a performing art group anchor on the artistic and cultural value of their theater performance, but not so much on a specific person or figure? That is worth deeper thought.

To give a quick overview of the 7Ps as evaluated

- Promotion of "communicate with"
- Product of experience that redefines Place
- New face through Physical Evidence
- Positioning with resonating motive
- Pricing that harmonized
- People not alienating

Overall speaking, Chung Ying's marketing strategies have done well in achieving its missions; to promote the art of drama by creating proximity in space and time for people to connect, interact and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Joanne Scheff Bernstein (2006) Arts Marketing Insights: The Dynamics of Building and Retaining Performing Arts Audiences. Kotler, N.J.L Wiley, p.257

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Tusa J. (1999). Art Matters: Reflection on Culture, Mentune

experience with its product and brand; and to *enliven cultural life of the communities* through artistic motive and identity that resonates with the communities at the present context.

### **Audience Building**

"Forget 'MASS' audience" - as Sir Roy Shaw (Secretary-General of the Arts Council of Great Britain from 1975 to 1983) commented: the public is made up of a range of minorities. <sup>24</sup>

Chung Ying's audiences building strategies have always been about the broad range of minorities. Programs, workshop and different level of engagement are introduced among different age groups within different communities. To name a few:

#### Elderly

Home Sweet Home is a community theatre project launched in Central and Western. Elderly from neighborhood elderly center and students from primary school all participated in drama training workshop, preparing for the joint performance.

## Children, Parents and Teacher

The SMILE progamme aims to provide drama trainings for children intelligence development, it also introduces new drama education concept to parents. Training workshop for teachers was also organized to sharpen their understanding in drama and teaching skills.

## Youngers and Teens

Through Theatre-in-Education, Chung Ying enlightens youth in the journey of self-development and discovery of inner abilities. It allows student from schools and service centres to participate in drama workshop and theatre appreciation for free. Through drama training and finale performance, teenagers' confidence was enhanced.

All these outreach and communities programmes not only cultivate but also retain audiences from different communities and demographic, more importantly, they also pave the way for making these younger groups become future theater lovers and practitioners.

To further deepen the relationships with audiences, Bernstein points out the demand from "Customers increasingly want to shape their experience by themselves or with their companions. Performing arts managers and marketers must understand that by involving their customers as *co-creators of the marketing product experience*, they have the best changes of broadening their audiences, building loyalty and satisfaction, and increasing frequency of attendance." <sup>25</sup>

Co-creating is not something new to Chung Ying, back in 2010, they started to introduce the Community Oral History Theater Programme, people from different communities got the chance to co-create the theatrical memories together and re-live it on stage.

# Community Oral History Theatre Programme

The performance, *Tai O, The Nostalgic Water Village*, was staged at Tai O, the fishing village, in which performers got to tell their own historical and cultural stories to the public. In another Kwun Tong Oral History Theatre Programme, *The People, the Story and the Memory*, the performance reconstructed memories from the past, highlighting the inseparable link between families and local community.

This is indeed a very good example illustrating how branding, marketing and audience building strategies could integrate seamlessly to build up a brand vision. Through empowering the people to cocreate the content and relive it on stage, these initiatives not only achieve promoting art, but also

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Commented by Sir Roy Shaw (Secretary-General of the Arts Council of Great Britain from 1975 to 1983)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Joanne Scheff Bernstein (2006) Arts Marketing Insights: The Dynamics of Building and Retaining Performing Arts Audiences. Kotler, N.J.L Wiley, p.194

deepening participation through experiencing theater; that is literally how cultural life is being enlivened, experienced and shared.

Perhaps what Chung Ying can do further, instead of repeating the same artistic formula at different places, it can explore collaborating with other art forms, such as visual art group or galleries to enrich the artistic experience and cultural life for the public.

#### Good or not?

As a summary thought, the word "evaluate" seems to suggest that a standpoint is needed after reviewing and discussing the above. And as stated at the very beginning, this paper aims to discuss and review the strategic motive behind Chung Ying for the *need to be good* <sup>26</sup>, *good* in the sense that the branding, marketing and audience building strategies are contributing to its organization mission. Under this thought, Chung Ying is *good*.

But then, what defines good?

In Chung Ying's annual report 2012/13 and 2013/14 <sup>27</sup>, it was indicated there was a significant decline in the total number of audiences and participants, while the total number of programs and workshops also decreased. What was <u>not</u> measured and reflected in this annual report was the satisfactory level of director/artists, qualitative feedback from audiences, and most importantly, whether Chung Ying is able to achieve its organization mission.

If the government uses these parameters to evaluate an art organization, to judge if it is a success or failure, will it do so just by looking at the number of audience and works? This is something worth thinking about.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Eyre, The Future of Lyric Theatre in London 1998

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Chung Ying Theater Annual Report 2013/14 (www.chungying.com/about/periodicaldetails/annual\_report)