

Small Arts Organization in Hong Kong – The Limitation of Its Development Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble (竹韻小集) as a Case Study

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Abstract

Apart from the Big Nine flagship performing arts organization in Hong Kong, there are many small to medium arts organization, hoping to survive with its limited resources. How to have a sustainable development for the organization is a big challenge for them. After conducting an interview with the founder, Mr. Chan Chiu-yin, this essay will take Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble as a case study to explore its hierarchy and management, positioning strategies, and its limitation, as well as to analyze how the funding by Hong Kong Arts Development Council influences its development. Finally, a long-term strategic plan and art entrepreneur idea are suggested for future possibilities of the small arts organization.

Keywords

Performing Arts, Small Arts Organization, Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble, HKADC Year Grant Scheme, Development and Limitation, Future Possibilities

Apart from the Big Nine flagship performing arts organization in Hong Kong, there are many small to medium arts organization, hoping to survive with its limited resources. How to have a sustainable development for the organization is a big challenge for them. Choosing the Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble to study has a reason, as it is the only Chinese music group among the 54 organizations which is receiving the Hong Kong Arts Development Council Year Grant Scheme². Supposing it does not have as many competitors as the other performing arts group, however, its development is in a slow progress. Therefore, after conducting an interview with the founder, this essay will take Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble as a case study to explore its hierarchy and management, positioning strategies, and the limitation of its development, as a result, to find out the future possibilities of the small arts organization.

Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble was established in 2003 by Mr. Chan Chiu-yin (陳照延先生), having a mission to “promote Hong Kong Chinese music culture”. Their vision has 4 slogans, which are to provide a platform for local professions; to preserve and promote culture; to root in Lingnan tradition; and to integrate Chinese and Western.³ In view of this, they have a very clear mission and vision, focusing on the local and would like to share the Chinese music to the public. Yet, the slogans are rather general and broad. It would be better to point out the specific outcomes that the ensemble would like to achieve.

Reviewing the organizational structure, it is divided into two sections⁴. One is the administrative section, while the other is artistic section. There is one Managing Director, who is the founder Mr. Chan Chiu-yin, and two administrative contract full-time staff. They are responsible for year planning and carry out all logistics, administration, finance and marketing works. On the other hand, there is one Artistic Director, who is the conductor Mr. Ho Man-chuen. Under the Artistic Director, there are 13 regular musicians who form the music ensemble. They are responsible for the artistic related issues, programme planning, and being the performers on stage. Both directors work together closely to run the organization. Therefore, it can be classified as an organic organization, since the whole group has 3 administrative staff only and each of them does not have a fixed role, but multi-tasking, which is a common phenomenon for the small arts organization.

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² “Grant Recipients List,” Hong Kong Arts Development Council, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://www.hkadc.org.hk/?p=3184&lang=en>.

³ “Mission,” Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble Ltd, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://www.hkwindpipe.org/page.php?type=1&lang=2>.

⁴ *ibid*

However, there was a significant change due to the policy of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) in 2011. To apply for the funding, it is required to set up as a corporate company, and form a board committee, in which the HKADC would like the organization to have their self-regulation after receiving the grant. Therefore, the Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble became a limited company, and report to their board committee as well. This cultural policy has changed the hierarchy of most of the small arts organizations in Hong Kong. According to Conte and Langley, there are 4 major types of performing arts companies – it could be artist-driven, board-driven, management-driven, or shared leadership company⁵. In view of the organization structure, Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble is led by the board committee, however, it is set up to fulfil the policy only, the ones who really manage the organization are the Managing and Artistic Directors. The function of a board committee could not be fully utilized for most of the cases.

After understanding the hierarchy and management of the organization, it could be further exploring the positioning strategies of the Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble. In general, it does not have a strategic planning for the long-term growth of the ensemble, but what could be concluded is their development history. At the very first stage, they were in the process of exploration. The founder Mr. Chan set up the ensemble and organized concerts regularly and continuously, hoping to provide a platform for the young musicians. And then, through different kinds of performance experience, they established their mission, characteristics and uniqueness to survive in the arts field. The next step, is how to achieve artistic professionalism of the ensemble, and build up their branding, nevertheless, there is still a long way to go, especially the organization has limited staff and resources to expand and develop.

But as mentioned before, Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble is the only professional Chinese ensemble group receiving the HKADC funding. When comparing it to the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, its uniqueness could be easily seen. Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra is a full orchestra with 73 resident musicians, and its repertoire is usually large-scale concertos⁶, and influenced by the western symphonies style⁷. While Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble has 16 resident musicians only, which is formed by tradition strings and woodwinds instruments, its repertoire is a list of small-scale pieces when comparing to the concertos. In view of this, the formation of the Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble is actually following the Chinese tradition, yet, exploring the modern way to positioning the ensemble, and with an artistic motto “Small but elegant, simple yet refined”. It tries to develop another direction of Chinese music, apart from the influence of western symphonies, which becomes the uniqueness of the organization.

Influenced by the nature and size of the ensemble, its presentations are surrounding the traditional Chinese music, which includes the element of classic and masters, traditional and modern, new stars, and different region characteristics in China. These structure the programming of the concerts, and curate the Chinese music festival in every year. Interestingly, Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble also takes the local culture as an important asset. The resident musicians are music graduates from Hong Kong tertiary institutions; the group often use the local instruments and promote Guangdong music; in addition, they commission local composers to build up their own repertoire. Furthermore, the ensemble is getting the Leisure and Cultural Services Department’s (LCSO) funding to be the Community Cultural Ambassador since 2007, and have the School Culture Day Scheme since 2010, for enhancing the local reputation. As a result, the ensemble becomes a Hong Kong representative to other region festivals, and serve as a role of cultural preservation and modernization, to fulfil the mission of the ensemble – “promote Hong Kong Chinese music culture”. Different from the other arts form, such as drama and dance, music field is actually more difficult to build up their own established programmes.

⁵ David M. Conte and Stephen Langley, *Theatre Management: Producing and Managing the Performing Arts* (United States: Hollywood, Quite Specific Media Group, 2007), 60.

⁶ “Concerts,” Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://www.hkco.org/tc/index.html>.

⁷ “*重塑真正東方美學：迷失中尋找香港中樂出路*,” HK01, accessed December 16, 2017,

<https://www.hk01.com/01%E5%8D%9A%E8%A9%95-%E8%97%9D%E5%BC%8E%E6%96%87%E5%8C%96/53641/%E9%87%8D%E5%A1%91%E7%9C%9F%E6%AD%A3%E6%9D%B1%E6%96%B9%E7%BE%8E%E5%AD%B8-%E8%BF%B7%E5%A4%B1%E4%B8%AD%E5%B0%8B%E6%89%BE%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E4%B8%AD%E6%A8%82%E5%87%BA%E8%B7%AF>.



Of course, having a good programme is not enough for the small arts organization, marketing and promotion are essential as well, but are always neglected. The profile picture of the Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble is young and fresh, which reflects they would like to expand the audience group to the new generations. Using Facebook, Weibo and YouTube for promotion is low cost but far-reaching. However, with the limited budget, the ensemble could not expand their marketing plan as the Big Nine. The Facebook page has 2,000 likes only⁸, and the promotion design is quite an old school. Therefore, one could criticize that marketing is the weakness of the ensemble, so that the audience is always the same group of people. Branding is difficult to establish. It is also one of the reasons why the development of the small arts organization is so slow in progress.



After discussing the case study of Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble, a few points could be concluded as the limitation of small arts organization's development in Hong Kong. Firstly, the HKADC funding restricts their development. Not only because of changing the hierarchy of the organization, but also there are more administrative requirements, such as holding committee meetings, doing auditing works, this becomes a huge burden to the small groups. Although there is Arts Administration Internship Scheme⁹ sponsored by HKADC helping to add manpower to the small groups, the intern is fresh graduate only who is learning from the organization, rather than inputting some professional knowledge. Furthermore, for each internship scheme could last for two years only, the intern will leave if the organization does not have a budget to hire he/she as a staff, then the organization has to apply for the next round internship scheme and help train a new intern. All the above limits the development of the small arts organization.

Venue is also another problem. For a performance arts group, it needs spaces for storage, rehearsal and performance. Without spaces, they could not grow. For Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble, their storage, office and rehearsal spaces separate into three different area – Kwai Chung, Sham Shui Po and Kowloon Bay. The efficiency is low and extra travelling is required. Performance venue is not easy to secure as well, since it is not a member of the Venue Partnership Scheme. Some may argue that the LCSD Community Cultural Ambassador provide performance opportunities for the group. Yet, it is rather a local outreach and education activities than a professional performance, and the group has to absorb the production and promotion cost too.

With such limitation of the organization itself and policy support, what are the future possibilities of a small arts organization? A long-term strategic plan is needed, as well as to revise the organization structure. Mr. Chim Shui Man (詹瑞文) pointed out "The government's subsidy creates a comfort zone for theatre companies. But they would easily lose their motivation to expand and excel. Receiving

⁸ "Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble Ltd," Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble, accessed December 16, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/windpipe2003/>.

⁹ "Arts Administration Internship Scheme Open for Applications," Hong Kong Arts Development Council, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://www.hkadc.org.hk/?p=4988&lang=en>.

subsidy is like working as paid staff, yet the only one who has courage and power to leap forward is the entrepreneur.”¹⁰ Referring to this comment, Windpipe Chinese Music Ensemble is a similar case, which is in their comfort zone. It satisfies the current situation and believes it would be the operation format. How to be an art entrepreneur and step forward, would be the key exploration of the small arts organization in Hong Kong.

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