

Community Murals Serve as a Meeting Zone of Art Tourism in Hong Kong

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

As a teaching muralist for almost two decades, Prof. Kong Ho explores his community mural experience in Hong Kong in the perspective of art tourism and cultural reinvention. Ho intends to apply his recent conducted mural tour experience for the Whittier College in Hong Kong as a case study to offer a first-hand understanding of the impact of community murals in art tourism and cultural development in Hong Kong. The concept of community murals was a relatively new art form in Hong Kong during the late 90's while Ho just founded the Hong Kong Mural Society in June 1997. Only a few community murals created in Hong Kong during that time. The public estate and school mural projects launched by HKMS from 1997 to 2001 exemplify community-based art practices in Hong Kong. The 1.5-day mural tour for Whittier College set an example of the value of art and culture, which serves as a meeting zone of art tourism in Hong Kong. The mural tour has visited 7 estate and school murals, completed from 1998 to 2007, in Hong Kong. This paper explores how these almost 20 year-old community murals reinvent their art and cultural values in term of current innovative art tourism in Hong Kong. Ho's insights into community art and the meaning of cultural and creative industry are unique because he presents them as academic research through his practical experience. The aim of this research is meant to highlight the value of community murals in the Asian society.

Keywords: Public art, community murals, art tourism, creative industry

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Introduction

Watching nine Whittier College students and faculty imitate the postures of animals on the first school mural, Belilios Public School Mural, as shown in Figure 1, organized by Hong Kong Mural Society (HKMS) under the Muralists-in-Schools Project in 1999 feels a little like traveling back in time.



Figure 1: 8 Whittier College students and faculty and 2 Hong Kong Mural Society artists posed in front of the Belilios Public School Mural on June 7, 2017 in North Point, Hong Kong.

Heat and humidity are the worst things about mural painting. They wear on you. I still remember painting this mural with Joel Ferraris, one of the HKMS muralists, and 30 Grade 7-9 students in a hot early summer of 1999 in Hong Kong. Most of HKMS muralists are primarily studio painters or teaching artists, so painting outdoors under the hot and humid summer is not an easy task. We worked with the art teacher and scheduled 12 mural painting workshops as twice after-school-project workshops a week for 6 weeks. Usually, we started painting at the hot afternoon in the school courtyard. The students were very talented art club members, but it was the first time for them to paint on real stone wall with acrylic paints. I was surprised by their enthusiasm in finding a relevant theme for their mural and research for images for the composition. Even it took more patient to teach this cohort of students to paint mural, I enjoyed the time to work with them and to share the young people's perspective of environment protection and technology.

Belilios Public School Mural

Martie Geiger-Ho (1999), HKMS co-founder, explained the significance of this first Muralists-in-Schools Project in the joint school mural exchange exhibition brochure:

Because the visiting muralists worked side by side with the students, the

students were able to ask direct questions about their ideas, as well as technical matters, such as how to mix color or which brush to use on what area. The art teachers and other staff members also found that each visiting artist also brought a little of his or herself into the classroom, so that the students could learn about what it means to be a professional artist living and working in Hong Kong. Moreover, the direct contact with Hong Kong artists allowed the students to feel that their creative ideas and mural project was being recognized not only as an important cultural contribution within their school, but within the Hong Kong community as well. (p. 3)

Each mural site has its unique challenge to muralist and participants. The Belilios Public School Mural is located in the open courtyard of the school. Therefore, we cannot paint if it is raining and the summer is the raining season in Hong Kong. Additionally, the wall surface is rough granite stone, different from regular primed flat cement wall surface. It is already hard for students to paint a big mural for the first time, but it is harder for them to paint on uneven wall surface. Both Joel and I have to have more patient in teaching students how to paint on stone surface. Also, there is a metal water pipe across the lower part of the wall, which causes another technical problem for this mural. The mural paint is professional water-based acrylic paint, which is good for almost any surface. However, the water pipe is painted with oil-based enamel, which is not compatible to water-based acrylic. We pick a light green enamel for the water pipe to blend in the mural color scheme.

The first impression from students and faculty of Whittier College towards this 18 years old school mural was amazingly well-painted. They thought that the students might have very good painting experience and they admired the student talents in figuring out the environment protection theme for their first school mural. They were shocked when I told them that all students were the first time to paint with acrylic because they couldn't afford to purchase artist's grade acrylic paints for their regular art classes. Also, the students were the first time to participate in this collaborative mural project. They learnt how to share their ideas in mural composition discussion, to work with their peers in painting the mural, to create meaning in their after-school-project, and to make friends with other participating students.

Angela Ngan (1999), art club chairperson and one of the participating students, mentioned the theme of this school mural during the mural ribbon-cutting ceremony:

You can see from our painting that one side is space and the other is a pile of cans and they are linked by a river which merges into a galaxy as it moves towards the Earth. The space represents advanced technology and the cans just show the possible fate of our environment in the future. All of us knows that pollution has become a serious problem this century. We are developing our technology. At the same time, we are also destroying our environment. In the future, animals and plants may have to be put into metal cans to be preserved. But we don't want this to happen, this is the aim of our mural. We hope technology can save our environment and set the animals in the cans free. (p. 11)

The *Belilios Public School Mural* represents one story of Hong Kong community mural movement and its artist-in-residence education. HKMS organized two more Muralists-in-Schools Projects after 1999. There were 36 high schools in Hong Kong

participated in these 3 years school mural projects, which was sponsored by two newly founded government funded organizations: Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), founded in 1995, and Quality Education Fund (QEF), established in 1998. Before 1997, there was not any artist-in-residence program at any schools in Hong Kong. Most of schools hired their own art teachers, who usually graduated from one of four education institutes or a local university with fine arts program in Hong Kong. Muralists-in-Schools Projects benefited not only the students and art teachers of participating schools to have the opportunity to study and work with the local artists, but also the participating artists to connect with their local community and contribute their talents in enhancing the art education in Hong Kong.

Holy Trinity College Mural

The imaginative content and cartoon-like expression of the Holy Trinity College 2nd Mural, painted in 2007, gave the Whittier College visitors a lightened feeling in comparison with the first school mural. The school principle had specially arranged three former participating students to share their mural painting experience with the visitors on that morning. Three students explained the symbolic meanings of the mural composition to the visitors. The sailing ship in the center of the mural represents the school sailor uniform, while the giant white dove on the left top side stands for the Holy Spirit in Christian school. The big panda on the center right symbolizes the animal protection and the snack bar on the right side illustrates their desires for having a snack bar in the school. The joyful mural design and humorous expression of Holy Trinity College Mural exemplifies how students identify themselves with their school and community. This school mural project offered students a unique opportunity to express their imaginations and feelings towards their studying environment through art. The outcome of this school mural project is more than a cheerful mural but a sense of belonging which participating students felt towards their school. Seeing the eagerness of three Holy Trinity College former students in explaining the mural content to the visitors, reminds me the excitement when I launched the first community mural project in Hong Kong 20 years ago. Before we left for another estate mural, all Whittier College visitors took a group picture in front of the mural, as shown in the Figure 2, with the principle, Jane Or, three Holy Trinity College former students and four HKMS artists.



Figure 2: 8 Whittier College students and faculty, 3 Holy Trinity College students and the principle, and 4 Hong Kong Mural Society artists posed in front of the Holy Trinity College Mural on June 8, 2017 in Shek Kip Mei, Hong Kong.

The concept of community mural project was novel at the time when HKMS was founded because most of public murals were mainly commissioned public art projects and executed by selected artists, not general community members. There is a fundamental change from commissioned public art projects to community art projects because the interests of sponsors switch from focusing on actual art objects to the meaning of collaborative process. Community mural projects allow participants to get involved in actual mural design and production processes to include their voices and stories of their community. Drescher (2002) has described the difference between public art and community art:

In the 1960s and 1970s, mural artists developed a model, community-based process for creating community murals. Prior to that innovation, murals were public art but not community art. Projects were painted for viewing audiences and placed inside public or government buildings. The community mural movement brought both the art and the process outside, onto the streets, and developed a new kind of public art. (p. 7)

Pilot Housing Estate Mural Project - The Art for the Masses Scheme

In the mid-1990s, murals were a relatively new art form in Hong Kong because the majority of imagery displayed in the public domain carried a commercial message or advertised a product. I founded the HKMS, a nonprofit art organization, with Geiger-Ho on June 1, 1997—one month before the Handover—in Hong Kong. My idea to establish the HKMS as a kind of art entrepreneurship helped to create an alternative means of supporting artists in building cultural and creative industry in Hong Kong. Instead of criticizing about Hong Kong's hedonism and lack of culturally engaging public art, I decided to take advantage of the grant sponsored by the Hong Kong

Housing Authority (HKHA) to launch the pilot community mural project “The Art for the Masses Scheme—Care for Your Estate” in 12 public rental estates throughout Hong Kong in 1998.

One of the challenges in launching this pilot estate mural project was not the negotiation with the sponsors about the freedom in mural design but the consent from all participating HKMS artists about the essentials in community mural design. Some of the participating HKMS muralists considered that they would design the mural and execute the mural all by themselves like commissioned mural projects. However, the aim of this pilot community mural project was about collaboration between artists and participating community members and offering community ownerships to participants. I explained the importance of participants’ involvement in participating community murals:

I persisted in recognizing the active involvement of community members during all stages of each mural’s design and production. I believe now as I did then, that when engaging with a mural that falls under the heading of “community public mural,” it is essential that the mural design should include some significant references of the mural’s site. These references were: the cultural importance of the site; its geographic history; memorable events or figures that once were, or are important in the community; and the aspiration and stories of the community. (pp. 10-11)

The light blue-green underwater aquarium scene of Lek Yuen Estate Mural, as shown in Figure 3, in Shatin, Hong Kong, definitely helped to cool down the hot and humid May weather for the Whittier College visitors. This was one of the twelve public estate murals under the pilot community mural project and was a unique exemplar at that time. Joel Ferraris, a Hong Kong-based Filipino artist, led this community mural project and worked with estate school students and community members for almost three months in 1998. After discussing the mural design with the participating high school students and community members, Joel came up with this aquarium idea because of the geographic significance and demographic of Shatin. Shatin is located in a valley on both sides of the Shing Mun River and is one of the Hong Kong’s most successful examples of new town developments in Hong Kong with a 2011 population census of more than half million. Most of Lek Yuen Estate residents are new comers or low-income workers. Therefore, they expect that their new community will bring them relaxing feeling like having a river, an aquarium, or a fish tank in their living environment. Moreover, the mural site is located next to the high traffic estate bus terminus, so daily estate commuters are very proud of themselves because they have a luxurious mural in their community. In addition, this community mural design, as shown in Figure 4, represents the victory of HKMS in convincing the HKHA to accept the creative idea that the estate mural does not need to showcase the actual grand outlook of the estate but the intangible dreams of community. Community mural project brings people together to foster the community ownership. Ciara Clark, one of the Whittier College students with majoring in global and cultural studies, told us during the visit that this housing mural brought the aquarium beauty of Hong Kong Ocean Park, where she had visited before, to the ordinary estate community.



Figure 3: 8 Whittier College students and faculty and 3 Hong Kong Mural Society artists posed in front of the Lek Yuen Estate Mural on June 8, 2017 in Shatin, Hong Kong.



Figure 4: Section view of Lek Yuen Estate Mural. Joel Ferraris led this community mural project and painted with estate school students and community members in 1989.

I still believe that the role of HKMS muralists should be those of teaching artists who help the communities to connect back to their beliefs and values that driven them, along with their cultural identity, so that the resulting murals are more meaningful to the community and the future visitors.

Muralists-in-Schools Project

Building on the success and reputation that HKMS had built after the completion of the estate mural project undertaken with support from the HKHA and HKADC, HKMS received a second major grant from the QEF and HKADC in 1999 for support its second community mural project “1999 Muralists-in-Schools Project (MISP).” Similar in scope to the “artists-in-schools program” and “teaching artist program” in the U.S., the MISP enabled twelve HKMS muralists to work in 12 high schools located in various districts throughout Hong Kong. The goal of this project is to pair one or two artists up with each school, where they can work collaboratively with the school teacher and participating students to produce a mural which would represent its school culture and identity in accordance to the values and ambitions of its students.

The Sai Kung Sung Tsun Catholic School Mural, as shown in Figure 5, was the last visited school mural in this two-day community murals tour. The Whittier College students were curious to know the meanings behind all years painted on this 4-story high school mural. Joel Ferraris and I were the muralists for leading this school mural in 1999 and Joel and Irene Leung took care of the mural restoration in 2009 by adding a new memorable year of 2009 on the mural and restoring the colors of the mural.



Figure 5: 9 Whittier College students and faculty, the school art teacher and 4 Hong Kong Mural Society artists posed in front of the Sai Kung Sung Tsun Catholic School Mural on June 8, 2017 in Sai Kung, Hong Kong.

John Bak, film studies professor of Whittier College, asked an insightful question about the all visited community murals during the tour. He was the one who found HKMS website online and make a request for this special community murals tour. He would like to know the reasons why most of the visited community murals were 18-20 years old. After 1992, most of sponsorships from HKADC, QEF and HKHA for community mural projects were running low because the government policy to support community art development had changed from sponsoring worthwhile community art initiatives, as shown in Figure 6, to supporting emerging individual young artists' art projects. Also, allocation most of government funds to cover HKADC administration expenses caused insufficient financial support to local artists or art organizations. This policy change reveals the shortsightedness of art policy decision makers, who do not value the significant outcomes of community art projects but have their own political agenda in assessing the project grant applications. It is sad to see the unbalance development of visual arts in Hong Kong for the past 20 years. On the other hand, this school mural represents the genuine support from the school education sector who believes the value of preserving the history and culture of Hong Kong art education. It is hard to believe that this school mural is the first restored school mural of HKMS for the past 20 years. Undervaluing the importance of mural restoration and lack of funding are two major obstacles in revitalizing the community murals in Hong Kong. Devaluation of community mural projects and insufficient sponsorship from government are the crucial setback of community mural development in Hong Kong.



Figure 6: Hong Kong Arts Development Council. (1997). Art for The Masses [Featured Ho's community mural project]. *Newsletter*, 12(3), 7-9. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

Cultural and Economic Impacts of Community Murals

Spending two days with Whittier College students and faculty for visiting seven community murals, as shown in Figure 7, in Hong Kong can be hard to fathom that Hong Kong, also known as a cultural desert, also has some community murals with cultural significances. Revisiting these 18-20 years old community murals bring back a lot of bitter-sweet memories, plenty of hardship, abundant dialogues, numerous laughing moments, countless unforgotten faces, and thousands of creative souls. It is true to say that the community mural painting process has up-close and personal influence on participating individuals. However, the cultural and economic impacts of surviving community murals on the society and the future audience is also undeniable. Community murals unite people through collaborative art making and inclusive community engagement. Community murals generate meeting zones for diverse communities and/or individuals. It is difficult to overstate the significance of cultural value of these past surviving community murals to some Hong Kong people and foreign visitors or tourists because these murals have witnessed the tremendous political and social changes in the past 18-20 years in Hong Kong.



Figure 7: 6 Whittier College students and faculty and Kong Ho posed in front of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Shaw College Mural on June 8, 2017 in Taipo, Hong Kong.

Community murals have become a part of Hong Kong cultural and creative industries in the past twenty years. Hong Kong is grappling with a daunting notorious reputation – cultural desert in the past. How to change people perception of art and cultural development in Hong Kong becomes a consequential task for local artists and art policy makers. For most Hong Kong people these HKMS surviving community murals are the truly cultural heritage of Hong Kong at best. It is hard to imagine the role change of HKMS from community mural advocator to cultural industry supporter, from mural productions to mural tourism. Jaffe (2016), chief editor of *Teaching Artist Journal*, described the cultural significance of murals:

Murals of one kind or another seem to be present across all cultures and

historical epochs, often sharing defining characteristics. Murals have always been about playing with internal and external spaces—bringing “the outside” in and turning “the inside” outward. While in certain places and times murals were a decorative or politically significant luxury of ruling elites, even these cloistered and concealed works eventually became part of public life as palaces fell to ruin and became playgrounds for children or tourist attractions, or as tombs were revealed centuries or millennia after they were sealed. (p. i)

Conclusion

A lot has happened since the first school and estate mural projects launched in 1997. Surviving HKMS community murals are now reaching more people than ever, and they are transforming lives in the context of school and community in the past 20 years. Even though some HKMS community murals have already varnished from the communities because of the demolishing or remodeling of some public estates, the remain influence of those varnished murals is still buried deep in the hearts of former individual participants. Golden (2006), executive director of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (MAP), described the importance of community murals:

In so many ways, MAP has become more about changing lives than about art. Don't get me wrong: the art we're producing is still beautiful and inspiring and important to us. But the changes I see in the people we work with are also beautiful and inspiring and important. I've seen art provide comfort to troubled lives. I've seen art inspire people to change and do better. I've seen art become a way to rebuild community. And I've seen art serve as a tool of redemption. (p. 10)

Art is a subdivision of culture. The value of art and culture in society is indisputable. This may be what Hong Kong's tourism future looks like: a transnational cultural corporation. In this 2-day community murals tour, the Whittier College faculty and students had witnessed the cultural value of some community murals in Hong Kong. At the same time, our HKMS artists had understood the value of cultural interpreter in the field of creative and cultural industry. Goldbard (2006) described the significance of cultural development, “Although projects may yield products of great skill and power (such as murals, videos, plays and dances), the process of awakening to cultural meanings and mastering cultural tools to express and communicate them is always primary” (p. 148).

I believe that the successful community murals with cultural significance should be open-ended, leaving content and focus to be determined by participants and leading muralists. As noted earlier in the Belilios Public School Mural, whereby the direction of the school mural project is focused through discussion and experimentation of participating students and muralists, which is a key element of authentic community cultural creativity development. Also, authenticity becomes the keystone of inspiring community murals and insightful art tourism and the true meaning of cultural and creative industry.

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