

# Hong Kong joins the culture club

## INTERVIEW WITH HENRY TANG

CHIEF SECRETARY FOR ADMINISTRATION, HONG KONG SAR AND CHAIRMAN, WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT AUTHORITY



**HENRY TANG** has been a member of Hong Kong's Executive Council since 1997 and served as a member of the Legislative Council from 1991-98. Before joining the Government, Mr Tang was a leading industrialist in Hong Kong, serving as Chairman of the Federation of Hong Kong Industries and receiving the Gold Bauhinia Star Award in 2000. Prior to assuming his current position he was Secretary of Commerce (2002-03) and Financial Secretary (2003-07).

**For a small place Hong Kong has always thought big, and the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) is no exception. What was the thinking behind the project and what impact do you expect it to have on Hong Kong in terms of the city's quality of life and creativity?**

If you look at the world's major metropolitan cities – say New York or London – art and culture is a very, very important part of those cities. People may be drawn to them for reasons of commerce, or industry, or the cosmopolitan lifestyle that they represent, but art and culture is an integral part of their DNA. It provides fuel for the mind, for the soul, but it also is an important economic pillar. Take the theatre, for example: it's not just the performers that you see; it's the backstage technicians, the set designers, the creative people, and the managers who put it all together. That represents a lot of job opportunities.

These cities are important hubs for art and culture. People come from all over the United States and the world to listen to the Metropolitan Opera. People come from all over Europe and the world to visit the British Museum or Tate Modern – because they are there.

I feel that this is an opportunity and a moment for Hong Kong where by doing something bold, like the West Kowloon Cultural District, we are able to propel ourselves forward, both in terms of our international

profile and in terms of improving the quality of life of the people living here. I call it 'bringing arts to the people and bringing people to the arts.'

On the other hand, we don't want to create an art house for its own sake. We want it to be a place for the people, that is to say: vibrant, lively, with good connectivity and that blends into the environment. It should be a nice place to go to for a coffee in the morning, for drinks after work, for art lessons for children or for adults who always loved Mozart but don't understand Mahler, and want to learn how to appreciate Mahler. So, I want it to be that kind of place where you can do all of this without buying a ticket to an art event, and where you can admire the breathtaking view over Victoria Harbour.

**The artistic and cultural districts of the sort of cities you mentioned have developed organically, over a long period of time and reflect the historical, ethnic and political character of their environment. Is it really possible, even in a famously can-do place like Hong Kong, to simply graft the arts onto everyday life in a city that has traditionally shown little appetite for them? Or, to put it another way: if you build it, will they come?**

We don't want to do anything that is artificial, and after the first two phases of the public engagement exercise

the public's voice was loud and clear: they would prefer the District to grow organically rather than to open with a big bang and have everything built in one go, which is why we have decided to roll out the facilities one at a time, starting in 2015.

I think it is a little unfair to suggest that Hong Kong lacks culture, however. We have a very strong and vibrant Cantonese Opera culture; many people like to sing opera in their spare time and, judging by the number



Artist's impression of the West Kowloon Cultural District

of karaoke places around Hong Kong, people like to perform. So, I think Hong Kong people do appreciate art and culture, even if it is pop art, or pop music – it is still art, so it's not as if we are starting from scratch.

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**Even so, building the sort of world-class, large-scale venues you are talking about is clearly a big step.**

I think there are very few places in the world that have the audacity to launch such a bold project, and the reason we are able to attract the best architects, designers and other creative talents to join us is because, unlike most of these projects around the world which have to rely on government funding, with the whole annual tug-of-war that that involves, in the case of the WKCD we have adopted a different approach.

First of all, we approved a one-off, up-front grant of HK\$21.6 billion, to cover the cost of constructing the various venues. We then allocated around 20 per cent of the total gross area to retail, dining and entertainment (RD&E), the revenue stream from which will then be used to fund the running costs of these venues.

Most arts and culture venues cannot break even by themselves, which is why they need constant government subvention. But under our funding model there will be no need for recurrent taxpayers' money, once the construction phase is completed. Given the gradual pace of development that we have adopted for the project, we should even be able to cover any rise in construction costs from the RD&E revenue stream.

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**The WKCD has been under discussion for a decade, which is an aeon in a fast-moving city like Hong Kong. Why has it taken so long to come to fruition?**

It was very controversial ten years ago, when the project was first conceived, partly because people didn't like the giant canopy that was originally proposed, and secondly because they didn't like the idea of a whole project being let in one giant tender, so that whoever won the tender would build everything and manage it. I think the community didn't have the confidence that whichever developer ended up winning it would be able to do justice to the arts and cultural aspect, which is why we decided to split it up so that around 40 per cent will be commercial, residential and hotel in nature – this will not go into the project itself but will be retained by the government – 20 per cent will be RD&E, and the remaining 40 per cent will be core arts and culture facilities. The Authority will manage the core arts and culture facilities and the RD&E, so therefore this is not a property project per se in any way. When we re-launched the project in 2007 there were initially people who doubted our model and were convinced it would still be a developers' project, but I

think we have now managed to convince the sceptics that it really isn't.

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**Was the choice of Foster + Partners' masterplan a popular one with the public?**

I think the public likes the plan very much. They like the green features, particularly the park right at the headland where the view is most spectacular. Some people might question the wisdom of siting a park in the best location but I think it is the right thing to do because it will give the harbour back to the people.

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**Hongkongers have been crying out for a waterfront park for years and the issue of access to the harbour has always been a sensitive one. Was that the key to Foster's success?**

That was one main consideration but there are others as well. Rem Koolhaas and Rocco Yim [the other short-listed candidates] are both exceptional architects, but with Foster's plan there were certain qualities that made it more conducive for us: we were impressed by the park and the green features, but we were equally taken by the degree of flexibility it will allow. The plan includes a lot of stacking, which maximises the available space.

Some people have complained that there is nothing special about the concept, saying that it is simply a park that otherwise looks like an extension of the city. The point they have missed is that is exactly what Foster wanted to do. He asked us at the time: "do you want this to stand out like an icon, or do you want it to blend in to the environment?" I like the fact that it tries to blend in rather than stand out, and some of the buildings that will be individually commissioned will stand out anyway, so therefore I believe that those buildings should be the centre of attention rather than the whole district itself,

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Chief Secretary for Administration, Henry Tang and Alastair Harris, Executive Publisher and Editor of FIRST



Photography by Terry Duckham/AsiaPix

People are now much more vocal in asserting their rights, which I think is one of the qualities of a maturing and more sophisticated community

otherwise it will simply alienate the people. We want people to feel comfortable and to wander seamlessly into the West Kowloon Cultural District as if it were just another part of the city – because it is.

**What measures are you taking to minimise the project’s environmental impact?**

West Kowloon is 40 hectares, so it’s big enough to make an impact and small enough to be manageable. We want the green features of the project to be so prominent that people will hold it up as an example. It will be costly because some of the environmental features are not cheap. For example, instead of every building having its own cooling units we will have a district cooling system, which will be much more efficient, use less energy and leave a smaller carbon footprint. There are other features, such as roof gardens, where we will mitigate the heat of Hong Kong through roof gardens and save energy in the process.

**Before reunification in 1997 you said: “once we become part of China again I think we will become more Chinese.” How would you characterise Hong Kong’s identity today, 14 years on?**

I think anyone who has come back to see us since the handover, whether five, ten or 14 years later, will

have been both surprised and excited by what they have found. Firstly, surprised how little Hong Kong has changed; the flags are different and we have the People’s Liberation Army instead of the British Forces, but the freedom, the rights, the independent judiciary, the largely corruption-free and efficient government – all of these are still very much intact and, indeed, some of them are proliferating. For example, people are now much more vocal in asserting their rights, which I think is one of the qualities of a maturing and more sophisticated community.

So, these are the elements that I think will surprise people. But people are also excited because Hong Kong has turned into a city where we go through paradigm shifts and transform ourselves multiple times in a very short period. I always say that the cycles in Hong Kong happen in a much more compressed and exaggerated manner than in other parts of the world. For example, In the 14 years since our return to China, we have seen two financial crises and two epidemics.

Faced with an economic crisis in 1997, property prices fell 60 per cent in a year but the banks did not collapse and the number of mortgage defaults was exceptionally low. So when the going gets tough, the tough really do get going. **F**

**2010: A good year for Asia’s wine capital**

The news in September that a 300-bottle collection of Chateau Lafite Rothschild sold for \$540,000, a world record price for a single wine lot auctioned this year, is further proof of Hong Kong’s ever increasing appreciation of fine wines.

Last year, Hong Kong overtook the United States as the world’s wine auction capital, and judging by sales so far this year, it has every intention of keeping that title.

The man Asian wine lovers can thank for putting Hong Kong on the global wine map is the city’s Chief Secretary, Henry Tang, who along with John C Tsang, his successor as Financial Secretary, cut duty on wine from 40 per cent to zero in 2008. Imports surged to \$858 million last year, from \$185 million in 2007.

“It was one of those government actions that allowed us to virtually create a new industry,” explains Mr Tang, himself a wine connoisseur and collector.

Aside from simply making it cheaper to import wine into Hong Kong, Mr Tang explains that it was necessary to provide the infrastructure for storing

high quality products.

“To distribute wine you must have the first class logistic services, you must have a temperate climate,” he says.

Temperatures can soar to 35 degrees Celsius, with relative humidity near 100 per cent, factors that could render a \$75,000 bottle of Chateau d’Yquem undrinkable.

Changing Hong Kong’s climate was out of the question, but the city’s entrepreneurs soon found that there was money to be made from storage: 99 per cent of the population lives in apartment, so collectors rent space in specially built “cellars.”

The boom in wine sales is being driven by wealthy mainland Chinese, but there is also local demand for lower-priced wines, which the Eighth Estate Winery is meeting. It moved here in 2007, and now produces 60,000 bottles a year, from imported frozen grapes, with a capacity to triple that volume.

The burgeoning wine trade hasn’t only benefitted tipplers, as Mr Tang points out: “By reducing taxes to zero, in 2008 and 2009, we created more than 5,000 jobs and 700–800 companies whose primary business is wine.” **■**