

The Status of the Artist: An integrated Analysis of International Identification Methods

(1) Definition and Identification

UNESCO tries to give an overall definition of the artist, which is, essentially, by self-identification:

“Any person who creates or gives creative expression to, or recreates works of art, who considers his artistic creation to be an essential part of his life, who contributes in this way to the development of art and culture and who is or asks to be recognised as an artist, whether or not he is bound by any relations of employment or association.” (UNESCO 1980:5)

Frey & Pommerehne, researchers of cultural economics, enumerate eight commonly used methods for identifying artists (1989):

1. Amount of **time** devoted to artistic work;
2. **Earnings** from artistic work;
3. **Reputation** among the general public;
4. **Recognition** among other artists;
5. **Quality** of artistic work;
6. **Membership** in a professional artists' group or association;
7. **Professional qualifications**;
8. Subjective **self-identification** as an artist.

No 1 and 2 are commonly used statistics (census) methods that are generally employed together; 3 to 6 are admission or membership granting criteria generally used by artistic associations, and can be employed together; No 7 has to be employed with caution as qualification holders are not necessarily practitioners; No 8 is the most flexible method, and preferred by many countries in occupation survey; to avoid the accusation of bureaucratic interference in artistic freedom, this is the only method to be employed in some surveys (such as the artists survey conducted by the Arts Council of England).

The strengths and weaknesses of the said eight methods of identification, grouped into four categories, are tabled and discussed below:

Method of Identification	Examples	Annotation
Amount of Paid Time Devoted to Artistic Work	<p>(a) In the 1995 New Zealand Cultural Statistics conducted by the New Zealand Bureau of Statistics, the yardstick was the time devoted to artistic work in the previous 12 months (30 hours or more per week), inclusive of second job but exclusive of non-paid voluntary work.</p> <p>(b) According to the Australian Population Census 1996, 3.3% of the labour force (255,000) were employed in cultural activities.</p>	<p>This is an objective and standardized method which does not involve subjective artistic judgement, allows quantification and discriminates between full-time, second job and voluntary work.</p> <p>In the Labour Force Survey (1991) conducted in Britain, only those who devoted at least 40 hours per week in artistic work were considered full-time artists (while only 35 hours were needed for other employments).</p>
Membership in arts association or fellowship in arts academy	<p>(a) To enhance the treatment of the artists and literati, the <u>Imperial Arts Association</u> (later known as the <u>Imperial Academy of Arts</u>) was established in 1919 in Japan. Fellowship is limited to 120 and each enjoys an annual “gratuity”.</p> <p>(b) To retain artists and dissuade them from emigrating, the Irish Government set up the Aodana in 1981. The founding 79 fellows were appointed by the Arts Council and subsequent nominations are in the full control of the fellows. Fellows are elected through secret ballots. The fellowship is limited to 200. Those who pass a possession vetting are eligible for a tax-free annuity of 8000 pounds for 5 years.</p> <p>(c) The French Ministry of Culture and arts associations, such as L'Association française d'Action Artistique, École de Nancy, provide accommodation and living subsidies for eligible artists. Other associations, such as <u>Societe des Auteurs</u> (1838-) and <u>Societe des Dramatiques</u> (1777-), have very strict admission rules.</p> <p>(d) Members of the American Artist Registry have to have at least four years’ of professional training and one gallery exhibition annually. There are four types of members, and senior members serve as adjudicators for admission assessment.</p> <p>(e) In 1993, the Vermont Arts Council of the United States appointed adjudicators to identify artists for the Artist Registry. Artists were categorised into general, education and social service to facilitate employment referral.</p> <p>(f) The membership of official Chinese arts associations is stratified, vetted and graded by political leanings and class origin, with corresponding salary and accommodation allocation. It led to the so-called expert writers and expert artists.</p>	<p>The granting of professional artist status serves different purposes, such as honouring the literati (Japan), dissuading emigration (Ireland), providing welfare (France, China), or as professional guarantee for employment (American Artist Registry, Vermont Arts Council 的 Artist Registry).</p> <p>The Hanlin Academy of the Ming and Ching dynasties provided an imperial refuge for the literati. However, these court academics (serving as Hanlin editors or scholars-in-waiting) , editing and compiling official histories aside, contributed little to our cultural heritage.</p> <p>In old totalitarian communist states, a party branch was set in every arts association. As a result, admission assessment became, in effect, political vetting. The famous actor Zhao Dan, who died in a political purge, left as his final words, “ too tight a supervision will only strangle arts.”</p> <p>“As for people like Xiao Jun or Ding Ling, it wont do just by locking them up or kill them. We have to expose their mistakes, and publicly disgrace them and humiliate them.” Speech at the Second Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Mao Zedong, January, 1957.</p> <p>“Those opera singers, those poets, those writers, those playwrights, all have to be expelled from the city. They have to go down to the people. Take away the rice bowl of those who refuse to go. Only when they go down will it be returned to them.” Mao Zedong , Summary of 13 April 1964 Spring Festival Speech</p>

Professional qualification	<p>(a) Artists' associations in Britain, like the Incorporated Society of Musicians, admit only qualification holders as members.</p> <p>(b) Australian Bureau of Statistics' Survey of Work in selected Culture/Leisure Activities (1993)</p> <p>(c) The professional qualification of performing artists under Government payroll is stipulated in the "Rules and Regulations for Recruitment Committee for Performing Groups Subordinated to the Ministry of Culture" (1 August 1995),</p> <p>(d) Graduate Careers Council of Australia conducts an annual Graduate Destination Survey to track the employment status of performing arts graduates.</p> <p>(e) Australian Council of Arts' Australian Council Survey of Artists (1992-93)</p>	<p>(a) However, unions, such as the Musicians' Union of Britain, use self-identification as admission criterion to ensure comprehensive protection of practitioners' rights.</p> <p>(b) As a supplement to the Census of Population and Housing 1991, the survey allows a stricter occupation definition.</p> <p>(c) This is an indication of the Chinese Ministry of Culture's attempt to "de-politicise" artist status.</p> <p>(d) According to the 1996 survey, only 53% of performing arts graduates are able to get full-time jobs. In comparison, the employment rate for architecture graduates is 84%.</p> <p>(e) According to the survey, 70% of the artists are college educated, while 37% possess a college degree or diploma.</p>
Self-identification	<p>(a) Artist Registry (CACHH) of Arts Council of Houston, Houston, Texas, USA, aims to promote contacts between artists and the public.</p> <p>(b) Australian Women's Art Register, established in 1975 and has a membership of 1,300, keeps information folders of its members to facilitate marketing of members' works. There is an online archive and members' list for public reference. The register is located at the Richmond Library in Melbourne.</p> <p>(c) Austin Writers' League, USA, helps writers to network with agents and tracks developments in the publication market. The league also holds annual awards contests.</p> <p>(d) The America online artist association artistregister.com requires just USD 450 admission and an illustration of work as admission pre-requisites.</p>	<p>Most are mutual co-operations that promote artists' welfare and employment.</p>

(2) Compromise: Integrated Register

The above-listed artist status identification methods, then again, can be categorised into juried membership and direct membership; these two means of membership registration. (Lam Kwok-leung 1995 : 292) Most local associations of arts prefer juried membership (peer referrals, work appraisals, etc). However, when compiling the Register of Practitioners in Arts Education in 1998, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (ADC) opted for direct membership instead.

A compromise is **multiple enrolment**: artists can either enrol through objective identification methods or through self-identification plus practice history. They will be listed under juried or direct memberships. Multiple enrolment was the method preferred for the proposed enrolment of traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in 1998.

(3) Which register is best for Hong Kong artists?

Before setting up our own so-called artist identification, we first have to consider:

- (a) **Inappropriate official involvement may stifle cultural autonomy**: in Western countries, the cultural sector, constituent of the civil society, is regarded, in western countries, as the Third Force that counterbalances the bureaucracy and the corporate sector. Hence, Western Governments bend over backwards to avoid direct involvement in the formation of arts associations, unions or networks, in order to allow them free functioning in the promotion of cultural rejuvenation. (Fisher 1997:7). Identification through professional memberships or peer recognition requires time-tested common consent and artistic canons, which, as products of tradition, Hong Kong will not be able to acquire at short notice. The forced introduction of artist identification may lead to polarisation or turmoil within the cultural sector, detrimental to the development and consolidation of arts. High profile official or semi-official involvement will only “politicise” what is, after all, an internal issue that concerns only the cultural sector.

(b) **Professional arts qualification is not a guarantee of social and economic status:** comprehensive studies done in Europe and Australia have shown that professional qualifications do not necessarily, or automatically, give artists the economic or employment edge; nor does professional training guarantee a better artist. Only 31% of the practitioners in the British cultural industry are professional membership owners. (O' Brien & Feist 1997: ii) Artistic creation depends, after all, on natural talents. Providing newcomers and novices with more short-term grants or projects is a better way to discover new talents. Moreover, the global employment trend for creative industry is precisely the flexible “freelancing” model on short-term contract basis. A comprehensive artist network or a loose register is a greater help to corporations or public sector in locating the artists they desire, and a better way to enhance artist employment and social identity. (Towse 1996:36) Frequent physical checkups do not enhance health. Similarly, without the proof of concrete studies, it will only be wishful thinking to insist that artist identification will enhance artist status and employment.

(4) Preliminary Proposal: An Integrated Register

Official or semi-official involvement in artist registration may lead to accusations of infringement on civil autonomy, and prior common consent must first be reached. If the purpose of the register is for voter identification, the option is the said “integrated register”. Professor Everitt once proposed an “electoral college” for the cultural sector. The register should be made, through a neutral organisation commissioned by the Government, on individual basis. Registered members select the electoral college which, in turn, selects art form representatives to sit in the Arts Development Council. It also helps to safeguard vote manipulation or conflict of interest.

-End-

Bibliography

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. 1997. *Artswork. A report on Australians working in the arts.* Australian Council for the Arts.
- Fisher, Rod. 1997. *Arts Networking in Europe.* Arts Council of England.
- Frey, B. and Pommerehne. 1989. *Muses and Markets.* Oxford.
- Lam Kwok-leung, *Modern Cultural Administration,* 1995, Shanghai
- O' Brien, Jane & Feist, Andy. 1997. *Employment in the Arts and Cultural Industries: an analysis of the Labour Force Survey and other sources.* Arts Council of England.
- Towse, Ruth. 1996. *The Economics of Artist' Labour Markets.* Arts Council of England.
- UNESCO. 1980. *Recommendations Concerning the Status of the Artists.* Paris.