

Development stimulates new courses in cultural pursuits

West Kowloon complex spurs drive to expand teaching pool, writes **Elaine Yau**

Ever since former chief executive Tung Chee-hwa proposed the establishment of an arts and cultural complex in West Kowloon in the 1998 policy address, the development of arts has taken on a new life in Hong Kong, which has long been derided as a cultural desert.

With drama and visual arts classes being incorporated into formal curriculums, the demand for teachers specialising in the field has also risen over the past few years.

To cope with the demand, local universities have introduced new courses aimed at expanding the pool of arts professionals and trainers in Hong Kong.

With the introduction of the master of arts in visual culture studies last year, Chinese University has seen a substantial increase in applications.

Helen Grace, director of the master's programme of the university's department of cultural and religious studies, said local education reform had boosted the demand for professional arts trainers.

"We have seen a 50 per cent increase in applications this year," she said. "There are many cultural elements in liberal studies. As the subject will be one of the core subjects for senior form students under the new academic structure, the demand for arts teachers has increased a lot.

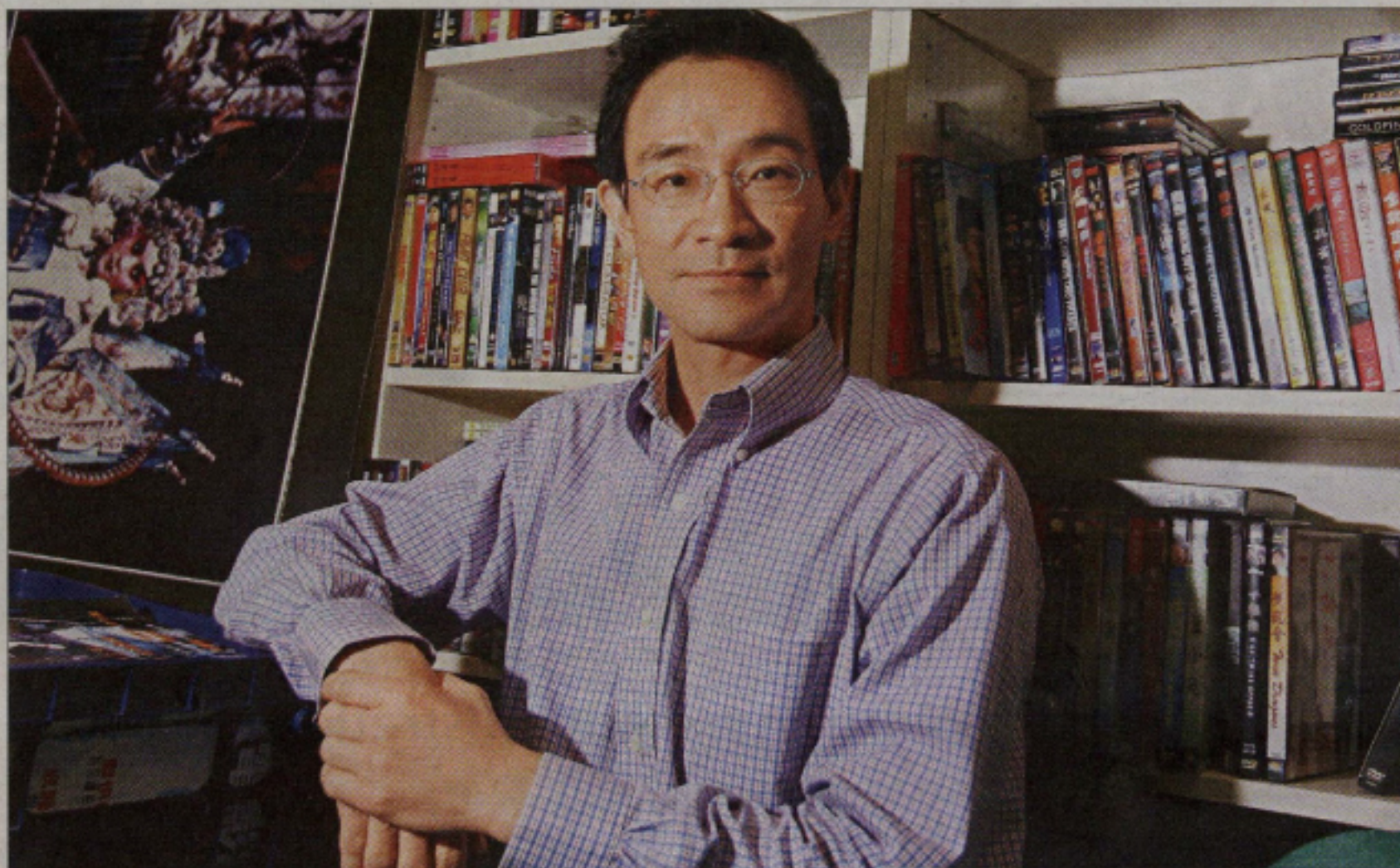
"The West Kowloon proposal includes the setting up of a visual arts centre. The public began to talk about visual culture and what it really means. The concept has become somewhat of a buzzword lately. Many people don't actually understand what visual culture is about."

Featuring courses on a wide range of visual media such as film, video and advertising, the course explored the power of images and their applications in daily lives.

"It's basically a theoretical course. It's about the various implications of visual media and helps students make sense of continuous images," Professor Grace said.

The course also has a strong emphasis on visual research projects.

"We are surrounded by advertising images, celebrities and productions nowadays. We encourage students to explore how those images are made, their implications for society as a whole. For example, my students have done a project



Li Siu-leung, director of the master's degree in cultural studies at Lingnan, said the subject was relatively new. Photo: Dickson Lee

ARTS AND HUMANITIES

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HELEN GRACE, DIRECTOR, MASTER'S PROGRAMME, DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES, CHINESE UNIVERSITY

on advertising for housing which explored how housing developments are sold in Hong Kong and the nature of space in shopping malls. For all the visual projects, they have to use visual methodologies to do them."

Li Siu-leung, programme director of the master's of cultural studies at Lingnan University, said the development of cultural studies had yet to take off in Hong Kong.

"The concept of cultural studies first gained popularity in the UK in the 60s," he said. "Compared with other subjects like comparative literature, it is relatively new. In Hong Kong, many still see it as an abstract subject."

Dr Li said the course encouraged students to explore cultural theories and phenomena with a critical eye.

"The theme of cultural criticism runs through our courses. Arts history is not our main concern. Students have to critically analyse how performance arts, movies, pop music and literature percolate and affect the society. Instead of asking why there are those artistic media, we explore how those artistic forms operate in various levels in the society."

A heavy dose of contemporary arts and local pop culture was one of the unique

features of the course. "Take contemporary local cinema as an example," Dr Li said. "When we study the triad films by Johnnie To Kei-fung, we are not concerned with how talented the director is and how the plots and characters reflect social mores. The main focus of our study is to see the political significance of triads in Hong Kong."

Dr Li said students had to keep abreast of all the recent arts events and developments in the society to critically analyse their implications using cultural study concepts.

"The West Kowloon Cultural District is a major case study in the course on cultural institution and policy," he said. "We explore the negotiation between government and society on how culture should be developed, the pros and cons of using public money to subsidise arts projects.

"On the other hand, the controversy surrounding the demolition of the Queen's Pier is related to our post-colonial studies. The community activism aroused by the event and the collective protective action for the pier reflected how the public view colonial legacy and how colonial history relates to the public in the post-colonial Hong Kong."