

Pricing Policy for Museums: Should We Privatisé Public Museums? A Case Study from Taiwan

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1. Introduction

The museum today is important as an institution serving a diverse and increasing array of roles in cultural life. The development from the traditional repository of a country's material culture to the multi-service institution is well-documented (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; McLean, 1997; Schubert, 2000). Consequently, visitors have increased, and the increasing interests of diverse publics and other stakeholders have created new demands to which museums must respond. However funds to meet these needs have not kept pace with the rising demands for service; thus as demands have increased, problems have emerged.

There has been considerable discussion in the museum world concerning the 'privatisation' of public museums.¹ Many connect the term simply with selling public institutions to private firms, and with governments passing on their responsibilities for the arts and culture to the market. In this context, the term 'privatisation of public museums' means the transfer of authority over collections, buildings, operations, and/or responsibility for funding one entity to another (Urice, 1995:2). The present is marked by a deep uncertainty about how museums and their role in society should be interpreted, and lack of money for running costs and purchasing budgets threatens to derail the objectives of even the most established institutions. With this rapidly changing context, how does the trend towards a public/private contribution to Taiwanese museums impact on pricing?

The discourse around 'charges' has generally focused on political influences. However, the wider international perspective has been in many countries a similar process of cuts in direct public funding, pushing museums 'into the marketplace', with a consequent need to emphasize income generation and marketing as never before (Moore, 1997:1). With increased resistance to taxation, increasing attention is being given to 'user charges' as a way that government can raise revenues without violating pledges not to increase taxes (Anderson, 1991). Therefore, pricing can influence museums to think more clearly about the benefits they offer the public and what the public perceives as the value of a visit. Another question is what are the factors that might influence a visitor's perceptions of the value-for-money offered by a recent visit to the museum?

In order to answer these two questions and explore the possibilities for developing the pricing policy of museums in a way that more fully reflects their fundamental and evolving purposes, this paper studies one aspect of economic reforms – privatisation of public museums. By comparing privatisation experiences in two public museums in Taiwan, I argue that privatisation is inevitable, but not a precondition for economic reforms. In the next section I examine the linkage between 'value for money' climate and approaches to economic reform. Section 3 briefly introduces a model to consider the different elements as key influences on pricing from a more strategic standpoint. Two experimental cases in

Section 4 provide an understanding of how museums are paying increased attention to pricing and revenue-raising strategies. The final section summarises the main results of the paper.

2. 'Value for Money' Climate

2.1 Museums and the 'Culture of Dependency'

The political and economic climate has changed, bringing in demands that museums become accountable, show 'value for money', and use market mechanisms to seek plural funding. McLean (1997:156) accounts for a significant change that has altered this 'dependency culture' □ the advent growth of independent museums. Many of them could be called 'mixed-economy museums', because a substantial part of their income comes from public grants. The growth of Independent Museums is one factor but there are others. Other services, not just museums, have experienced a decrease in public funds. A similar process is happening in other institutions; for example, universities' registrar departments blossom with new appointments in the activities of public relations, fund-raising and information dissemination (Sargeant, 1999).

The pressure for attracting more revenue has led museums to exercise pricing decisions in a number of areas. Yet museums have traditionally been free, and have neglected to develop thoughtful and informed approaches to pricing. There is a general impression that 'admission charges' are easier to collect than to establish an entire new mean of generation income (e.g. sales revenues from catering and merchandising). In the area of 'income', the museum needs to examine what is being exchanged, and to determine the appropriate value to be exacted in the marketplace. Thus museums strive for a general strategic approach to their pricing decisions, which is commensurate with their objectives, the position they wish to hold in the market, the composition of that market and the nature and strength of their competitors.

2.2. Museums and the Trend Towards the creation of public/private hybrids

Lately there has been considerable discussion in the museum world concerning the 'privatisation' of public museums. The privatisation of museums is still a shocking idea, and it is almost unthinkable to consider changing the structure of our cultural repositories. I suspect that museum curators are anxious about "privatisation" because they fear that after a while no-one will really want to run their costly and troublesome museums any more. All of them claim that the government should clarify in which way an "independent administrative corporation" must be structured.

However, Schuster (1998:129) calls our attention to the trend towards the creation of public/private hybrids. He points out that a simple categorization into two broad categories – public and private – is quite misleading. It is increasingly necessary to view cultural institutions through the lens of hybridisation rather than privatisation in order to improve our ability to document and predict their institutional behaviour.

2.3. Museums in the Age of Post-Industrial Leisure Society

In the early seventies, Bell (1974) identified one of the components that best characterise the post-industrial society as: the shift from a goods-production to a service economy. According to De Masi (2000), there is also a great development of the arts and the entertainment industry (also called the free-time or leisure industry).

With the emergence of cultural and demographic changes towards post-modernity and the post-industrial leisure society, Schubert (2000:67) claims that the public's perception of the museum has shifted from educational to recreational, from research and display to a more audience-driven and service-oriented approach. How should a museum position itself in the recreation and relaxation market? As Lumley (1998) remarked, museums are an international growth industry. Not only are they increasing in numbers, but also they are acquiring new functions in the organisation of cultural activities. It is through museums that societies represent their relationship to their own history and to that of other cultures and peoples.

Moreover, museums have been forced to acknowledge the importance of competition (Moore, 1994; McLean, 1997; Kotler and Kotler, 1998) and museums now compete for visitors with other cultural activities and leisure attractions, even if no charges were made for admission. Museums have been treated as places for cultural activities; is this approach truly related to their functions today?

3. Key Influences on Pricing

Recent studies of marketing strategies in terms of pricing policy involve customers exchanging value for benefit (Hill et al, 1995; Dickman, 1995; McLean, 1997; Kotler and Kotler, 1998, and Kolb, 2000). Economic theory suggests a simple trade-off; as prices increase demand falls. In practice, the relationship between price and demand is much more complex. Using numerous case studies, including examples from museums, Hill's model enables us to consider the different elements as key influences on pricing from a more strategic standpoint.

As can be seen in Figure 1, museums are characterised by diverse objectives. A number of potentially conflicting financial and marketing objectives need to be considered in formulating pricing strategies. Whilst commerce and industry are driven by their requirement to provide financial returns to stockholders, the mission of museums is broader than this. Market position relates to the perceptions of the museum held by its visitors and potential visitors. Price can be a determining factor in creating these perceptions, and conversely, the perceptions held about an organisation can limit its pricing flexibility. The nature of the target market will determine not only ability but also willingness to pay certain price levels. For example, the market for amateur events may consist largely of friends and family. Their main reason for attending may be quite unrelated to the nature of museum experience. Price levels which are set too high may restrict visitors to a loyal core. In formulating a pricing strategy it is also important to be aware of competitive prices. Museums may usually consider the prices charged by other museums in their region.

Figure 1 Influences on Pricing Strategy

Hill's model simply moves museums 'into the marketplace' and museums are viewed as productive units □ "firms"² which, in order to achieve certain objectives, engage in the transformation, via a production technology, of inputs to a mix of outputs (e.g. conservation, documentation, display, education and so on) that are valued by others. The question is how? How are public museums expected to be reborn as what will be called "firms"?

Since early last year, many museum directors, curators and educators have been disputing the Taiwanese government's plans to "privatise" public museums.³ The idea emerged in

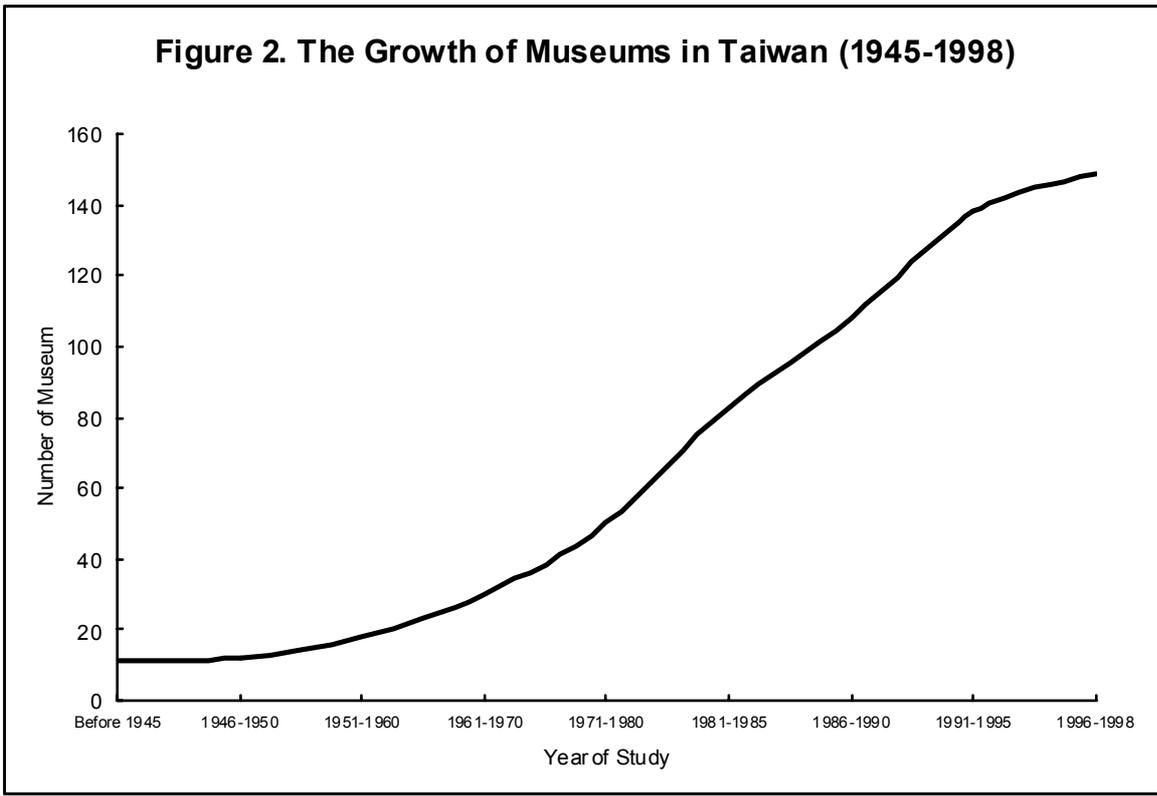
early 1998 as part of the central and local government's project to reform its administration. If the project is carried out with no further barrier, some currently national museums in Taiwan are expected to be reborn. However, museums will become quasi-private organizations independent from the Council of Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Education which currently control such museums.

This phenomenon of the hybrid museum interests me because it is highly likely that the policies that are being billed as privatisation policies in Taiwan are actually hybridisation policies. I will pay attention to Taiwanese museums which offer a particular informative case and explore the extent of hybridisation in two case studies. They are: the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, and the National Museum of Marine Biology and Aquarium. How do these museums select their pricing objectives within a mix of public interests and private interests?

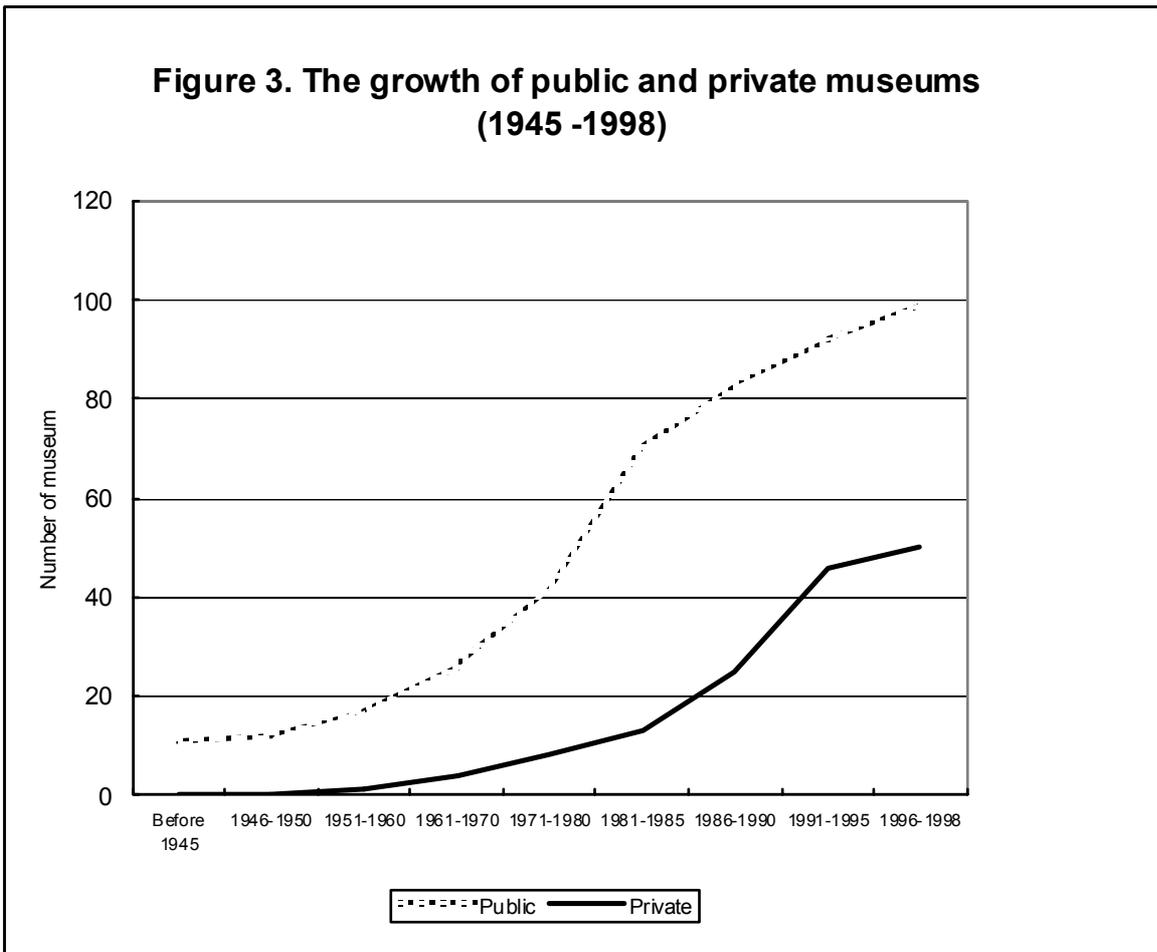
4. Case Studies

4.1 About Museums in Taiwan

In the 1980s, Taiwan's flourishing economy contributed significantly to a museum explosion. In 1980, there were only fifty museums in Taiwan, but by 1997 this number had increased threefold (see Figure 2). Cultural Statistics (1997) listed 149 museums in Taiwan, 99 of which had been set up in the last fifteen to twenty years, both by public and private governing authorities. As shown in Figure 3, before the 1980s many Taiwanese museums were public, while the trend of "private"⁴ was developing in the 80s and 90s. The root causes of this groundswell of interest in museums are not difficult to understand. First, growing interest in collecting inspired more collectors, who not only supported the art market but also increased the demand for museums. Secondly, the museum boom in Taiwan was a product of increased political liberty and cultural awareness, and Government regards the museum as an important cultural index within economic prosperity.



Source: Cultural Statistics (1997)

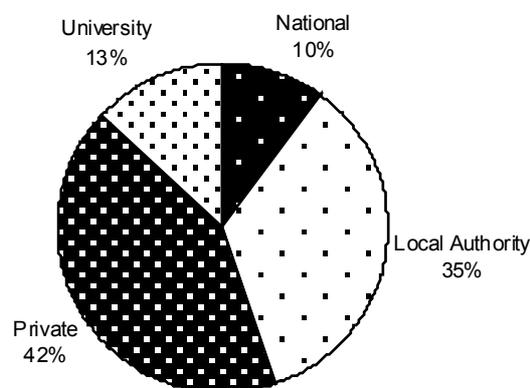


Source: Cultural Statistics (1997)

According to the Central Region Office Survey (1998), as seen in Figure 4, museums have

tended to be developed within local authorities. During the 90s, there were 29 new public museums in preparation and construction. Only one of these was a national museum, the others being local museums. Those local museums provide a sense of identity for their area and act as a cultural focus contributing to the cultural infrastructure. This has also had a knock-on effect in existing national museums, which have had to take these new standards into account in their own renewal and development programmes.

Figure 4. Distribution of governing authority of Taiwanese museums, 1998



Source: Central Region Office (1998)

4.2 Corporate Sponsorship Involvement at the Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei

Background

Opened in May 2001, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCATaipei) is the first museum in Taiwan solely dedicated to contemporary art. The building was originally built in the late 1910s as an elementary school, and then it served as the Taipei City Hall for forty years. The converted site was considered as a new exhibition space under the Taipei Fine Art Museum in 1995. Currently the Museum is run by the Contemporary Art Foundation, and supervised by the City Government.

Organisational Restructuring

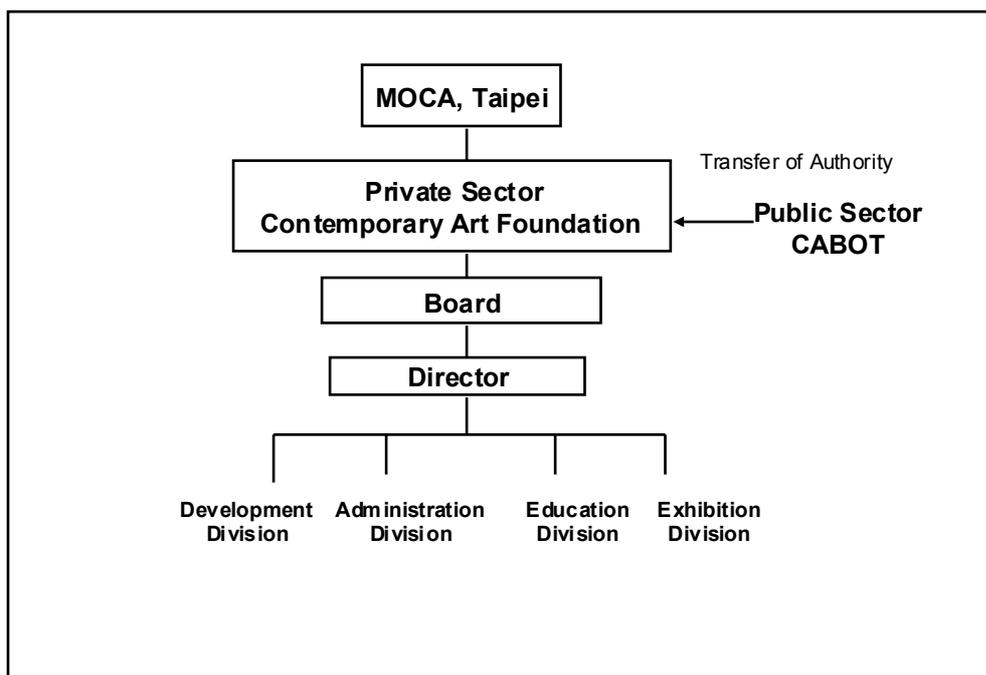
“The Foundation brings together many distinguished entrepreneurs and cultural professionals to provide financial support,” says Barry Lam (2003:6), chairman of

Contemporary Art Foundation. “Now a new relationship between entrepreneurs and cultural affairs is being established.”

Such corporate sponsorships have been carefully researched, selected, and monitored. Dr. Lung Yingtai (2003:4), Director of the Cultural Affairs Bureau of Taipei (CABOT), regards it as a unique and intriguing place: a cooperative institution run jointly by the Cultural Affairs Bureau and the business community.

The governance of MOCA Taipei by the Board of the Contemporary Art Foundation – jointly established by a group of generous supporters from the corporate sector and the City of Taipei – represents an entirely new model for Taiwan. Director Leon Paroissien pointed out that during 2002 a staff structure and administrative system were developed to provide the necessary infrastructure for the Museum’s small and tightly woven staff to realise efficiently its ambitious international programmes (interviewed 14 November, 2002).

Figure 5. Organizational Structure



Pricing Strategy – who is the decision maker?

51% of the budget is from the Contemporary Art Foundation. The annual fund of the Contemporary Art Foundation is provided by Acer Inc., Minsheng Daily, Quanta Education Foundation, TSMC Education & Culture Foundation, and Yong Ling Educational Foundation. 49% of the budget is from the City Government. A shift in corporate attitudes has recently moved from philanthropic giving to giving as a strategic investment. Five corporations pay

more attention to the benefits that any grant of theirs will return to them. In exchange for their support, they may be looking for increased visibility for their image and reputation. The first is a commitment to widening access. Prices might be kept as low as possible to encourage use of the service. Groups from schools are free of charge if booked in advance. Free entrance on Tuesdays is also offered.

“What do others charge?” is the preferred route for us,” says Ying-Ying Lai, former Deputy Director (interviewed 28 Nov., 2002). The MOCA, Taipei takes its pricing cues from what comparable museums nearby are charging. As can be seen from Table 1, if most of public museums charge from 20 p to □1.6 for admission, the MOCA, Taipei can feel justified charging □1 – but not much more. The museum-going public will be accustomed to paying □1 for admission to comparable museums but may balk if one or other of the private museums charge more. The MOCA, Taipei opened its doors without charging for the first month and then charged □1 following the advertisement which stated “50% off from original price”. Admission is free for: children under 6 years of age, senior citizens (65 years or older), welfare recipients (ID required), retired government employees (ID required), persons with disabilities (must be accompanied), veterans, and licensed tour guides.

In order to support the development of contemporary art and broaden contemporary art education in Taiwan, the Museum of Contemporary Art, (MOCA) Taipei, has established a Corporate Membership Programme (CMP). Upon joining, companies can gain access to a wide range of special benefits. The CMP membership fee for a company is □6000 each year.

Table 1. Admission charges among public and private museums in Taipei

Type	Museum	Adult □	Concession □	Group □
Public Museum	Taipei Fine Art Museum	0.6	0.3	
	National Palace Museum	1.6	0.6	1.3, up 20
	National Taiwan Museum	0.2	0.1	
	National History Museum	0.4	0.2	
Private Museum	Taiwan FolkArt Museum	2	1.6	
	Tittot GlassArt Museum	2	1.5	1.6, up 10
	Su-Ho Memorial Paper Museum	2.4	1.6	2.4, up 20
	Chang Foundation, Taipei	2	1	1, up 15
	Juming Museum	5	4.4	4, up 25
	Miniatures Museum of Taiwan	3.6	3	10% off, up 25

Visitor Profiles and Perceptions

The MOCA, Taipei undertook the first audience survey in December 2002. It was the primary research exploring visitors' backgrounds, preferences, and views of museum services. Not surprising, the picture that emerged confirmed that 92% of visitors to the MOCA, Taipei were well-educated and 53% of visitors were students by 21-30 years. 64% of visitors came for a special event or exhibition. Only 20% of visitors tended to seek relaxing experiences and interaction with other people, but these people view the museum as an unfamiliar place. 14 of 18 visitors who participated in focus group interviews (4, 7, and 12 January, 2003) didn't equate leisure with relaxation, and had a strong interest in learning about contemporary art. Frequent visitors (who visit the museum at least three times a year) accounted for 44 % of adults in the MOCA, Taipei. 93% of visitors were satisfied with the low admission charge, but they didn't have time or money for café or tea. There was much discussion about the museum shop. "I would like to buy catalogues, videos, postcards or souvenirs which are designed and made by the museum but there are few choices," says Grace Hsieh (interviewed 4 January, 2003).

4.3 Business Development at the National Museum of Marine Biology & Aquarium

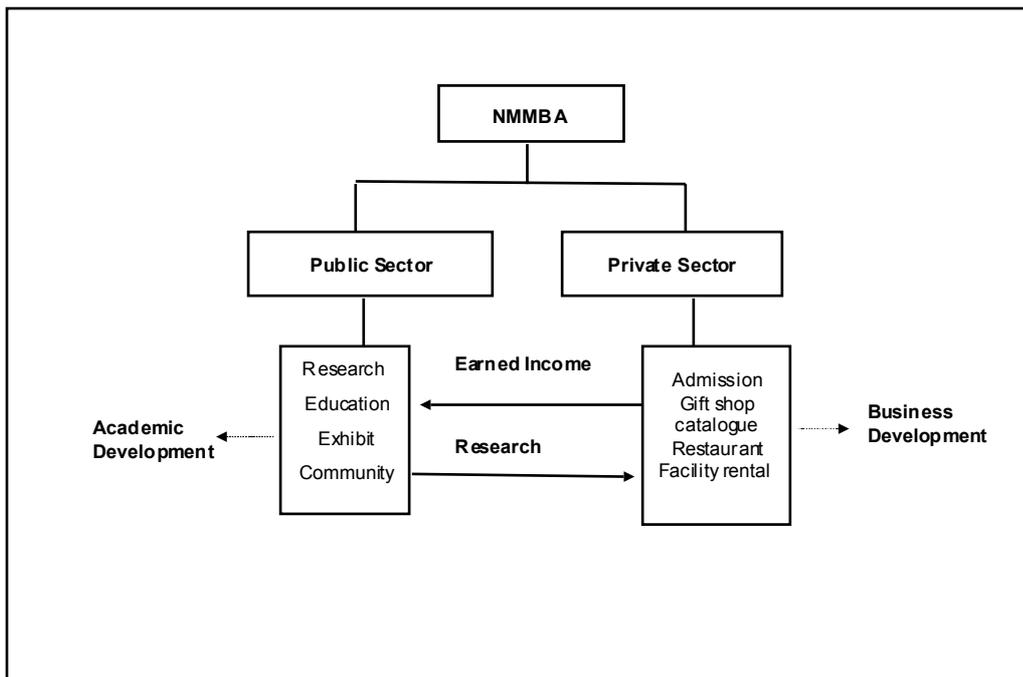
Background

In 1991, the preparatory office of the "National Museum of Marine Biology & Aquarium" was established. The first exhibition of "Waters of Taiwan" was opened on February 25, 2000 and the NMMBA took its first step to the unlimited frontiers of international marine education and research. Located between the mountain and the ocean, the NMMBA aims to demonstrate the spirit and characteristics of 'Water'. The construction of the NMMBA was awarded the first prize of 2001 Engineering Excellence by the American Consulting Engineer. The Museum is the only marine biology and aquarium for tourists in the South of Taiwan.

Organisational Restructuring

In July 2000, after the selection, the NMMBA entrusted the Hi-Scene World Enterprise CO, LTD with the professional operation and management of the Aquarium Department. The action established the first case of BOT (Build - Operate -Transfer) in Taiwan, and fulfilled the goal of privatisation. With this system, the authority is controlled by public sector but run under the collaboration of both public and private sectors (Fang: 2002).

Figure 6. The relationship between Museum and Hi-Scene World



Pricing Strategy – who is the decision maker?

After the Hi-Scene World Enterprise CO, LTD was joined, the NMMBA is becoming more aggressive in building earned-income programme as major means of support. ‘Self-generated revenue’ has been much considered. Charging for admission to national museums has been controversial. It can be seen from Table 2 that admission (adult) rates vary from the equivalent of 20p to £6. In the first year, its admission revenues were about £6.85 million with a high admission charge - £5 and the NMMBA attracted more than 2 million visitors. The second exhibition of “Coral Kingdom” opened in mid 2001, the museum raised its price to £6, and its admission revenues were £8.70 M. Visits still increased. After the final exhibition of “Waters of the World” to be opened at end of 2007, its admission will be raised to £7. To reduce visitor price sensitivity, the NMMBA adapted several small price increases instead of one large one. Small price increases are hardly noticed and seem justified in the face of rising costs.

Concerning the NMMBA’s aims in selecting its pricing objectives, many people both inside and outside museums have opposed the new emphasis on income generation. They argue that since museums serve public and educational purposes and have a distinctive fiduciary role of protecting national and local treasures for future generations, they should be set up for the free education of the people. In the face of new museum building, including facilities, Dr. Lee-Shing Fang, the NMMBA’s president, is increasingly sensitive to the balancing act between costs and benefits that revenue raising entails. The Museum now models itself on a corporation, and Director is called President. Dr. Lee-Shing Fang (interviewed 21 Nov., 2002)

pointed out that increased visitation levels generally mean greater costs, especially for most of the museums that are publicly supported. Expansion, in turn, results in larger operating budgets. “We also take into account existing charges in the tourism attractions, because the museum depends on earned income to discover what our visitors value and what they regard as quality. This keeps us competitive and accountable,” says Dr. Lee-Shing Fang.

Table 2. Spending on National Museums

Year	Museum	Government Budget □M		Earned Income □M		Price □
		2000/01	2001/02	Admission	Exhibition	
1907	National Taiwan Museum	2.365	2.827			0.2
1965	National Palace Museum	12.756	15.622			1.6
1986	National Museums of Natural Science	4.609	2.544	2.447	0.6	2
1988	National Taiwan Museum of Art	5.915	4.541			0.2
1997	National Museums of Science and Technology	3.663	2.118	1.26	0.667	2
2000	National of Museum of Marine Biology and Aquarium	0.602	0.0045	8.70		6
2001	National Taiwan Prehistoric Culture Museum	0.103	0.238	0.207		2

Source: Central Government Financial Statistics (2002)

Visitor Profiles and Perceptions

The museum commissioned the National Sun Yat-sen University to undertake a policy analysis and audience survey in 2000. The main findings were as follows. Visitors to the NMMBA tended to be more of a cross section of the community, wider ranging in education and social class. Students were the most common visitors, at 27.8%; this was followed by managers and officials, at 20.3%. 69.6% of visitors came with family and friends; this was followed by colleagues (40.5%), coworkers (35.6%), members of a club (12%), and neighbours (12%). Very few visitors came alone. Some visitors who participated in focus group interviews (13 and 14 February, 2003) did show a strong interpersonal and social component, and they also exhibit a learning lifestyle with intellectual curiosity; this leads them to be heavy consumers of continuing education courses, foreign travel experiences, and museum visits: “having an opportunity to learn” says Jack Jiang (interviewed 14 February, 2003). Occasional visitors (who visit once or twice a year) accounted for 90.6 % of adults in the NMMBA. 49.8% of visitors were not satisfied with the high admission charge, and they reflected that a reasonable price should be around □2 to □3. Concerning charges among gift shops and restaurants, visitors think them overpriced. The perception □ museums serve public and educational purposes □ has been raised again.

4.4 Summary

Decisions on pricing are based Hill's model in two case studies that can be summarised in the following Table 3

	MOCA Taipei Opened in May 2001	NMMBA Opened in February 2000
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Objective: Financial < Marketing ● Prices might be kept as low as possible to encourage use of the service. ● Pricing Schedule: <input type="checkbox"/> 1 (Free entrance on Tuesdays) No price discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Objective: Financial > Marketing ● Prices might be used to raise revenue that can be invested in expansion. ● Pricing Schedule: Adult <input type="checkbox"/> 6 Group <input type="checkbox"/> 5 Concessions <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Children, students, and elder person 65 years old <input type="checkbox"/> Children Group <input type="checkbox"/> 1.8 <input type="checkbox"/> Kindergarten <input type="checkbox"/> Free <input type="checkbox"/> Children below 110cm & handicapped can be free <input type="checkbox"/>
Market Position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The MOCA is the first museum in Taiwan solely dedicated to contemporary art, and the building itself is a designated site in Taipei. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The NMMBA is the only marine biology and aquarium for visitors in the South of Taiwan.
Price Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Considering existing charges in the museum field, the MOCA takes its pricing cues from what comparable museums nearby are charging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Considering existing charges in other tourism attractions, the NMMBA still needs to reflect on its educational purposes, so its admission charge is lower than other private competitors.
Nature of Market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 43 % of visitors came with friends. 32% of visitors came alone. Very few visitors came with family. 92% of visitors were well-educated and 53% of visitors were students by 21-30 years. ● Frequent visitors (who visit the museum at least three times a year) accounted for 44 % of adults in the MOCA ● 93% of visitors were satisfied with the low admission charge, but they didn't have time or money for café or tea. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 69.6% of visitors came with family and friends; this was followed by colleagues (40.5%), coworkers (35.6%), members of a club (12%), and neighbours (12%). Very few visitors came alone. Students were the most common visitors, at 27.8%. ● Occasional visitors (who visit once or twice a year) accounted for 90.6 % of adults in the NMMBA. ● 49.8% of the visitors show that an admission is not at the correct level. The reasonable price should be between <input type="checkbox"/> 2 and <input type="checkbox"/> 3

5. Conclusions

In this paper I have attempted to describe in a new way the Taiwanese museum landscape. Should government privatise public museums? How do 'hybrid' museums select their pricing objectives within a mix of public interests and private interests? There is also a need to consider the rationale for the private sector's involvement in the museum industry.

If admissions are to be taken seriously by a commercial partner, the Hi-Scene World Enterprise CO, LTD, they have to be of high quality with an appropriately high price. The government should not abandon 'research' support under the pretext of financial restructuring, and "Once 'privatised' and ruled by capital, museums might become unable to sustain activities that won't yield profit, such as research and conservation of cultural assets. Instead, they might be focussing on crowd-pulling exhibitions only," says Kuo-Nan Chung, the head of Education (interviewed 21 Nov., 2002).

On the other hand, in general, the Contemporary Art Foundation wants to keep admission charges as low as possible so as not to discourage attendance, and low admission fees are viewed not only as the corporate social responsibility but also as making good economic sense if the demand is highly elastic and fluctuates with price. The MOCA, Taipei heavily promoted its Corporate Membership Programme, and encourages companies to gain access to a wide range of special benefits. Yet 49% of the annual budget is still from the City Government. The result is a hybrid form that has the appearance of a private organisation, yet the central decisions continue to be state-controlled (Hutter, 1997:174-175). Even if "privatised", the museums will probably be granted a certain amount of government subsidies; the better part of the exhibitions being held at the present museums are already sponsored by such private corporations as major newspapers and television companies (otherwise the museums cannot afford such big exhibitions). In fact, much corporate support has shifted from philanthropic giving to arrangements that promote images and products. Corporations are demanding a far higher price for their support for museums: large audiences, reliable audience data, and discrete communication of corporate products.

The image of "museums serving public and educational purposes" is perceived by visitors in two cases where government giving is still a partial source of support for museums. Thus, it causes the increased debate of commercialisation of the NMMBA. In a different way, the Contemporary Art Foundation brings together many distinguished entrepreneurs and cultural professionals to provide financial support. Long-time relationships have arisen between museums and companies, but the Government needs to learn how to identify good corporate prospects.

Notes

¹ Privatisation seems to have made its initial entry into the political ideas with publication of Peter Drucker's book *The Age of Discontinuity* in 1969. The objective of privatisation is to improve efficiency through transfer of asset ownership from the public to the private sector. Since the late 1980s privatisation has been a feature in the field of culture in Europe. However, the cultural political debate on this issue has been hampered by speculations and prejudices. For a further discussion of this see Boorsma, van Hemel, and van der Wielen (Eds.) (1998).

² Museums use substantial amounts of labour and capital in performing their tasks. For a discussion of museums as productive organisations, see Johnson and Thomas (1998).

³ Recent years have seen a much greater interest in this issue, and a conference on the 'Privatisation' of Public Museums: *Theory and Practice* was convened at the National Taiwan Prehistoric Culture Museum in May 2002.

⁴ Museums are increasing likely to be created by private collectors, families or corporations.

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