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## Standard bearer

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# STANDARD BEARER

*When the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers held one of their key meetings at HKDI for the first time in March they took another step in defining the way designers will entertain us in the future. DAISY ZHONG reports.*

HKDI's state-of-the-art building is accustomed to seminars and workshops that focus on cutting edge contemporary design, but anybody who stumbled upon a classroom full of serious looking people last March might have been forgiven for thinking they had walked into a planning meeting for a bank or an insurance company. The group, mostly men in their 40s and 50s, were gathered around lap tops in the midst of coffee cups and sheets of paper and at first glance it looked like they were inspecting actuarial tables. As any good designer knows, appearances can be deceptive and a quick conversation revealed that the group was composed of people at the forefront of digital technology, doing work is helping to define the future of design.

From March 4-9 HKDI was the venue for the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) quarterly Standards Update meeting in Hong Kong, where the industry's experts and

professionals shared information about the industry's latest developments and technical trends.

The Oscar and Emmy Award-winning SMPTE is a professional membership organisation founded in 1916 in the US, and for nearly 100 years it has been the leader in developing more than 600 standards, recommended practices, and engineering guidelines for television production, filmmaking, digital cinema, audio recording, information technology, and medical imaging.

"SMPTE is among the top three most authoritative voices in setting standards in the motion picture and television industry," says Tony Ngai, the Chairman of SMPTE Hong Kong Section. "To have a unified standard is crucial for the movie and TV industry because it creates a common language through which different players in the industry can communicate and cooperate, facilitating communication and therefore business."

The Standard Update Meeting held at HKDI focused on Ultra High Definition (UHD, 4K and beyond) television and the High Efficiency Video Coding, the standard of which was released in January by the International Telecommunication Union, another key standards organization which is part of the United Nations.

Ngai explained that UHD such as 4K, 8K or 16K involves much larger amounts of data and therefore has to depend on a more efficient compression and coding technology. And HEVC is the most advanced video compression standard. According to Ngai, the

latest standard of HEVC features an up to 50 percent encoding efficiency improvement compared to previous versions and can therefore support 8K UHD and resolutions up to 8192x4320 pixels.

Implementation of the new standard has already taken place. In April, the HEVC (H.265) coding scheme was used successfully for the first time by the European-based bandwidth provider SES in testing an end-to-end file transmission of UHD (4K) content via satellite. The test paved the way for further HEVC-based transmissions, notably at the upcoming World Cup tournament in Brazil next summer.

Ngai firmly believes in the revolutionary role of new technologies on creative storytelling. "Technologies are enhancing our innovative abilities and breaking through boundaries. For instance, 'transmedia', the technique of telling a single story through multiple platforms and formats using digital technologies, opens the possibility of a much more diversified and effective form of communication."

The transformative power of new technology has accompanied the establishment and growth of SMPTE. When it was founded in 1916, motion pictures were in the silent era and films were shown in black and white. Multiple-reel films had just appeared, changing films from a group of short programmes to longer feature shows. In a broader context the 1910s was also

«THE WESTERN MOTION PICTURE MARKET HAS REACHED ITS LIMIT. CHINA HAS THE MOST POTENTIAL FOR ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY.»



a turbulent decade that saw the rise of the US fueled by its industrial innovation – the first moving assembly line began in 1914 and in 1915, the one millionth Model T rolled off the assembly line, signaling a fundamental change in the lives of American workers. It was followed by the roaring twenties, when the movie and broadcasting industries skyrocketed, especially with technological breakthroughs like accurate synchronization and sufficient amplification of sound.

As motion pictures developed into one of the most important tools of communication and entertainment in the 20th century and beyond, SMPTE spread to 64 countries and regions with nearly 6,000 members. Its Hong Kong Section was formed in 1995, as the local TV and film industry experienced rapid growth, and the number of engineers and production people engaged in the TV field has grown substantially.

But up to now one important region is still missing in SMPTE's global map – Mainland China, whose increased power in many industries is increasingly reliant upon science and technological development. Ngai reveals that an important reason for SMPTE's decision to come to Hong Kong for the Standard Update meeting is due to the increasing significance of Mainland China. "The Western motion pictures market has already reached its limit but China is the market that has the most potential for advanced technology. SMPTE has been attempting to establish

«DESIGNERS NOT ONLY FIX BUGS BUT ALSO IDENTIFY THEM AND EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES THEY OFFER»

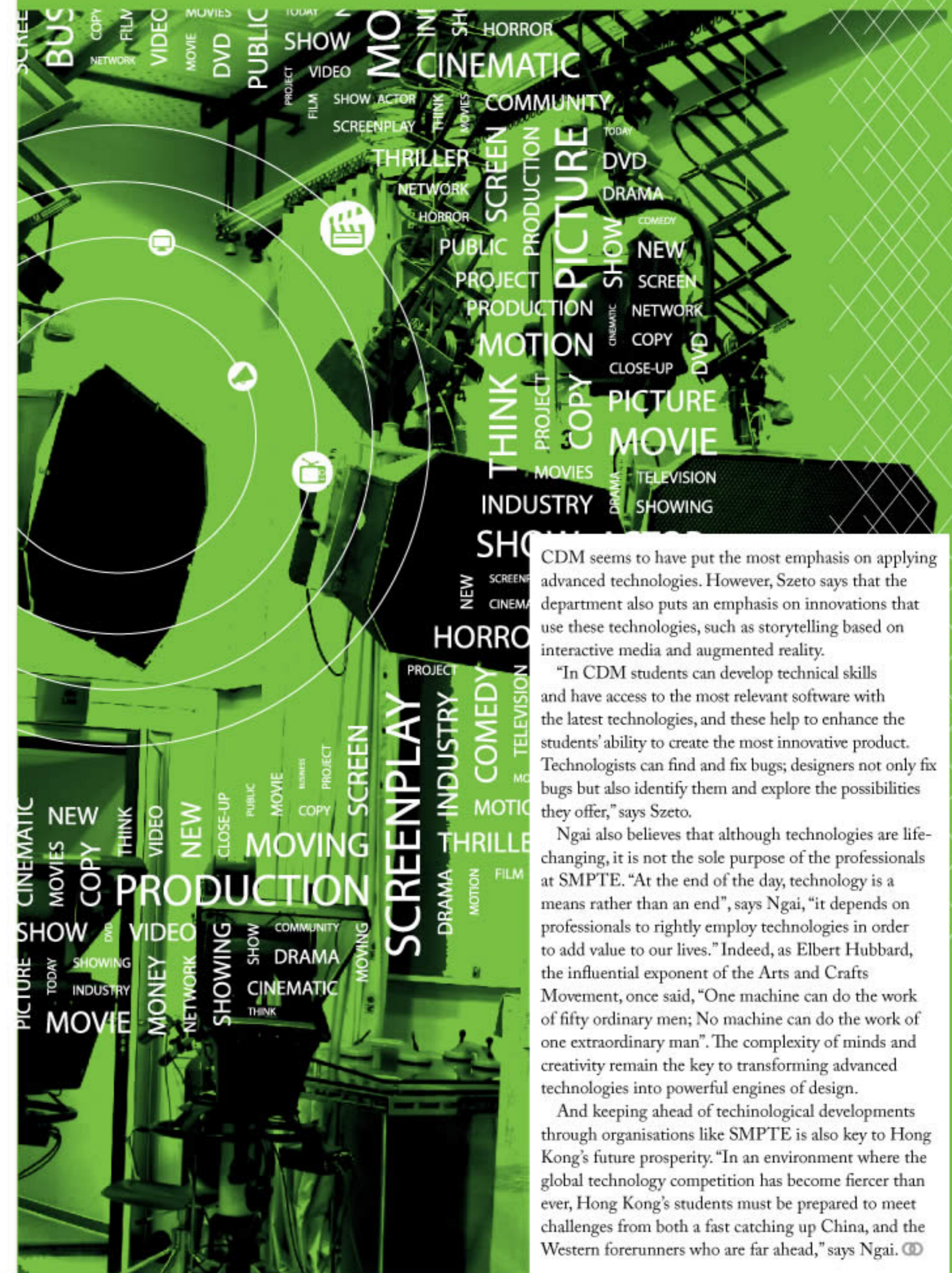
connections with the industry in mainland China and expand its networks there, and Hong Kong is the door step." Members from the SMPTE headquarters in the Hong Kong Section also made a visit to the Mainland recently to explore the possibility of establishing a Section there.

Precisely because of the transformative impact of technology, especially in story-telling, the HKDI's Department of Communication Design and Digital Media (CDM) of HKDI has been a pioneer in bringing advanced technologies to students through the department's close relationship with the leading players in the motion picture industry.

"One of the central functions of CDM is to build a strong connection between the movie and TV industry and our students to facilitate an exchange between them. We have close cooperation with institutions from the TV and film industries such as SMPTE," says Szeto King Fung, a CDM lecturer and the major consultant of the Student Chapter of SMPTE.

With SMPTE Hong Kong Section as its prime consultant, a HKDI-based SMPTE Student Chapter was established in 2007 and it expanded quickly from several dozen to over 290 student members by 2011. Its popularity is due to its provision of not only new information about advanced technology through all kinds of seminars, workshops, and industrial professionals sharing, but also the abundant industry attachment opportunities it offers. One of the SMPTE Student Chapter's ongoing projects in 2012-13 has been helping the Hong Kong Hockey Association to shoot their tournaments and produce videos of games. Other chances that are exclusively available for SMPTE Student Chapter members include job recruitment by the Jockey Club, TVB, ATV, Apply Daily, production houses and renowned film directors.

Among the four academic departments of HKDI,



CDM seems to have put the most emphasis on applying advanced technologies. However, Szeto says that the department also puts an emphasis on innovations that use these technologies, such as storytelling based on interactive media and augmented reality.

"In CDM students can develop technical skills and have access to the most relevant software with the latest technologies, and these help to enhance the students' ability to create the most innovative product. Technologists can find and fix bugs; designers not only fix bugs but also identify them and explore the possibilities they offer," says Szeto.

Ngai also believes that although technologies are life-changing, it is not the sole purpose of the professionals at SMPTE. "At the end of the day, technology is a means rather than an end", says Ngai, "it depends on professionals to rightly employ technologies in order to add value to our lives." Indeed, as Elbert Hubbard, the influential exponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement, once said, "One machine can do the work of fifty ordinary men; No machine can do the work of one extraordinary man". The complexity of minds and creativity remain the key to transforming advanced technologies into powerful engines of design.

And keeping ahead of technological developments through organisations like SMPTE is also key to Hong Kong's future prosperity. "In an environment where the global technology competition has become fiercer than ever, Hong Kong's students must be prepared to meet challenges from both a fast catching up China, and the Western forerunners who are far ahead," says Ngai. 