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Arts, Culture and the Making of the Global Cities. Creating New Urban Landscapes in Asia,
by Lily Kong, Ching Chia-ho and Chou Tsu-Lung, Chou, 2015, Edward Elgar, 272pp., £72
(hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-84980-176-8

Cities compete for recognition and resources, use each other as benchmarks and increasingly see culture as the 'magic ingredient' to urban economic development, as David Harvey (1989) asserted already in the late 1980s. The book is a welcoming input to debates on how culture, and its policies, contribute to urban economic development and cities' symbolic economies (Zukin, 1995), especially with its focus on Asian cities. Over the course of six years, the three authors wrote the book collaboratively; there are no single authored chapters. With a background in cultural geography, the authors reflect on a decade of qualitative research on cultural development in five East Asian cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taipei. Its main theme is to discuss their ambitions and efforts to become recognised as a 'global cultural city'. The book rests on in-depth single case studies that explore specific cultural projects and spaces in those five cities. Therefore, it is organised into two parts. The first five chapters discuss the construction of high-art 'cultural icons' in each city. The second part shifts the focus towards cultural clusters and the promotion of creative industries—this way the authors can discuss the two most important policy instruments for becoming a 'global cultural city' in those cities. An introduction and conclusion frame the ten substantial chapters.

The book's strength is its detailed empirical chapters. The chapters (2-6) in the first part discuss how and why the cities adopted cultural development strategies with projects such as the National Grand Theatre in Beijing, the Kowloon District in Honk Kong or the Esplanade in Singapore. These cases exemplify the 'shared dilemmas and challenges confronting global cultural city aspirations' (p.48). Such as promoting cultural elitism instead of broad cultural participation, raising urban land prices, binding financial resources in cultural policy budgets or privatised operation models that answer to cost-benefit calculations than broader societal aims of 'enrichment of resident's cultural lives' (p.63). They also raise specific dilemmas such as the tensions between national and local objectives (i.e. national identity-building versus local cultural development and broad cultural participation) or how the cultural industrialisation strategies in the Chinese cases resulted in supporting consumption rather than production. In part two (chapter 7-11), the five case studies on creative clusters focus on 'organically evolved cultural clusters' (p. 117) in which the cities began to intervene as part of their cultural and creative industries strategies as all of them favour spatial agglomeration approaches to develop culture and creative industries. The results of those initiatives are mixed but disclose similar observations. What begun as work spaces with strong supportive bonds among the artists eventually became financially unsustainable, displaced the artists, disrupted the creative networks and turned the clusters into commercialised spaces, an all too familiar story in cities across the world (see Miles, 2015).

The book underlines the problems of a highly instrumental understanding of culture in which culture can be managed, commercialised and industrialised at political will for mainly non-cultural outcomes—yet, which becomes increasingly contested as the case of Honk Kong’s West Kowloon district illustrates and where protest led to public consultations at the local level. Furthermore, what those cases reveal is the lack of a broad urban public that is educated and interested in culture, and that could sustain these initiatives. Within the top-down urban planning frameworks with their competitive ‘global’ market focus, there seems to be a lack of policies that encourage the local populations cultural participation, and who mostly appreciate the leisure quality of new public spaces around those infrastructures. The cultural programs are often too expensive, do not focus on audience development and do not help to cultivate the local arts scenes or cultural milieus that could strengthen the cultural identity and vitality of those cities; with Taipei as an exception. That raises the questions of what is distinctively urban about those newly build landscapes, and what kind of urban cultures do/can/shall they stimulate? It reminds of Pratt’s (2010) critique that the instrumental use of culture in consumption-based strategies needs to be balanced out with a focus on the intrinsic qualities of culture and creative industries. Most cases call into question if the cultural facilities have contributed to the cultural and economic development of the city at all. Moreover, the cluster initiatives are mostly driven by a consumption rationale than a production focus.

While the book is a welcome intervention into debates of ‘global cultural cities’ there are three critical issues. First, a considerable shortcoming of the book is that the conclusion runs short in theoretical contributions and the comparative perspective, which limits its impact. The theoretical context, in which the case studies shall be read, is presented in the introduction and hardly referred back to within the chapters. It is up to the reader to decide what to take away (e.g. for cluster theories), to challenge or to confirm existing knowledge and to make links to international developments outside the particular regional context. The authors hardly explain how those empirical results might influence how we think about global cities’ cultural ambitions, their approaches and limits, or how we can address the dilemmas. Nor do the authors indicate what is special about these approaches despite having rich empirical details and insights ‘to seize the opportunity to rethink some of these phenomena’ (p.2). For example, investing in iconic cultural infrastructure has become a popular strategy in cities precisely because of the expected investment returns and less because of their cultural use-value. As, most often, those institutions do little to support local cultural development but instead succeed in supporting tourism, business entertainment and urban regeneration efforts. What is rather needed are smaller arts venues that could provide work, rehearsal and performance space for local artists, add to the cultural diversity of the city and make for low entry-level cultural spaces for the local population. The dominance of non-cultural objectives in the cases’ cultural policies provides a base for a critical comparative approach to the increasing ‘hyperinstrumentalism’ (Hadley & Gray, 2017) in cultural policies that ultimately questions the necessity of a distinct public policy field for culture. But the comparative perspective remains underdeveloped—which is unfortunate as there are only a few attempts to introduce comparative perspectives on

urban cultural policies (see Grodach & Silver, 2013). The research field overflows with single case studies but lacks efforts to integrate and systemize findings across different urban experiences.

Second, the case studies are unbalanced regarding contextual information on the political and organisational frameworks for cultural policy. I missed a thorough description of the responsibilities between the different political levels of the state and the city (especially in the Chinese cases as well as Taiwan) to understand the scope of action those cities have. A detailed analysis of whether culture is the responsibility of the city, the state or both, of conflicts that follow from the divergent agendas, or the governance structures and the existence or lack of other cultural policies could have enriched the understanding and the argument in the book. That information is scattered throughout chapters and does not produce a comprehensive understanding of the urban politics and policies here. Moreover, thirdly, the cases studies on creative clusters mainly focus on fine arts and visual artists as a representation of creative industries cluster initiatives. I would have wished for more diversity as visual artists needs differ significantly from designers or musicians. And, I would have liked to read more on how those initiatives try to stimulate the sector as a whole—especially in the Chinese cases where the ‘industrialization of culture’ (p. 34) constitutes a major political goal.

Notwithstanding, I enjoyed reading the case studies as a concise, comprehensive book. It is highly recommended for scholars and students studying political approaches to the cultural economy in cities and especially for those not yet familiar with East Asian cities. For a lecturer in cultural policy, the book provides rich cases to go beyond teaching the ‘usual suspects’ of London, New York and Paris.

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