



State-led creative/cultural city making and its contestations in East Asia: A multi-scalar analysis of the entrepreneurial state and the creative class



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ABSTRACT

In East Asia, a top-down discourse of making creative/cultural cities, accompanied by widespread local state-led campaigns and their contestations, are now in full swing. ‘Creative/culture-oriented’ local governments equipped with various entrepreneurial strategies, as well as the grassroots creative class, have emerged as two distinct forces shaping new urban spaces that differ significantly from their Western counterparts. East Asian cities have thus gained value for the revisiting and interrogation of established academic debates regarding creative/cultural cities, which until recently were based primarily on Western experiences. This themed issue thus aims to present a fresh and enriched understanding of the making of creative/cultural cities in East Asia and the emerging contestations based on two sets of interrelated analyses: first, a multi-scalar analysis of the role of the state in the making of creative/cultural cities and various forms of creative and cultural clusters; and second, the discontent and resistance of the creative class and wider social groups against top-down strategies. We hope that this concerted effort can contribute to the unravelling of the complexity and peculiarity of the policies, practices, outcomes, and, especially, contestations of East Asia’s creative/cultural city making efforts. More importantly, we expect this collective effort to be added to the growing body of work challenging Western urban theories, which can be of limited utility in understanding urbanism elsewhere.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of deindustrialization and the shift towards post-Fordism, the creative city discourse has whipped up a worldwide frenzy of creativity/cultural-based urban and economic growth since the 1990s (Castells, 2000; Scott, 2006, 2007). Creative/cultural city making, which aims to encourage “overall structural competitiveness” (Jessop & Sum, 2000) in the global urban network, has dominated the local urban agenda in different areas. Under globalization, innovative ideas, “fast policies” and “best practice” models pertinent to creative/cultural city making have been disseminated through global networks established by supranational organizations and populated by mayors, consultants and other key actors. Official recognition by certain international organizations, such as UNESCO, offers “membership” to the “club” of cultural and creative cities since 2004, and was thereafter sought eagerly by city governments around the world (Pratt, 2010). To a large extent, this renders creative/cultural city making more of a top-down process. At present, 28 cities in the East Asian region have been included on the UNESCO Creative Cities Network for their celebrated development of creative industries that cover all seven categories, from media art, literature, music, gastronomy, design and film to craft and folk art. In particular, 12 Chinese cities have made it onto the list of UNESCO Creative Cities, and since the new millennium, China has experienced an unprecedented wave of creative and cultural industrial development. By the end of 2016, 2506 creative and cultural industrial zones had been established across the entire country, and creative and

cultural industries (CCIs) produced 450 billion USD in 2016, contributing to 4.14 percent of the total GDP.¹

On the other hand, in the economic restructuring, the expansion of higher education and the rise of the middle class have nurtured a large volume of “creative class” individuals in East Asia, who may or may not act in accordance with the creative/cultural policies implemented introduced by governments, but they nonetheless give rise to a vibrant bottom-up process of CCI development. Such individuals have contributed substantially to the economic vibrancy and cultural diversity of East Asian cities, yet they are constantly threatened by marginalization, reprisal and displacement. This leads to numerous contestations between top-down strategies led by the state and spontaneous endeavors of the creative class in the processes of creative/cultural city making, intensified by the cultural incongruence between the creative class and the “mainstream” or traditional values within specific societies.

Across the entire East Asian region, a top-down discourse of creative/cultural city-making is now in full swing, accompanied by widespread state-led campaigns at a local level, as well as resultant contestations. As the largest economy in East Asia, China has attracted more scholarly interest in its rapidly expanding CCIs, touching upon issues pertinent to the policy mobility of creative industrial development (Wang, 2004); the interrelationship between creative industries and social transformation (Keane, 2009); the governance and investment of creative industry clusters (Keane, 2013); and creative/art industries and urban (re)development (Wang, 2009; Zheng, 2010; 2011). In other parts of the region, from the “Korean Wave” and “Cool Japan”

¹ Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, URL: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/>.

to “Renaissance Singapore”, state-initiated schemes have come under scrutiny from scholars concerning the long contested marriage between culture and economy (Kong, Ching & Chou, 2015; Oakley and O’Connor, 2015), the selective investment in certain segments of the population to profit out of the tensions between artistic production and industrial production (Pang, 2012), or a consumer citizenship that repackages paternalistic and patriotic nationalism (Yue, 2006). The aspiration to become a global city has been commonly identified in East Asian urban strategies, in which tactics of creative/cultural-led (re)development resembling those in the West are commonly found, such as waterfront (re)development (Kim, 2017; Chang and Teo, 2009), digital, artistic or religious neighborhoods (Yue, 2006; Ho, 2009), and the regeneration of historical zones or vernacular settlements (Lin, 2017), among others. Nonetheless, the ever-changing and elusive state-market and state-society relations, which are of great significance in our understanding of the making of creative/cultural cities, set East Asia aside from the rest of the globalizing world, for which scholars have suggested various terms like Post-developmentalism, Neo-developmentalism, neoliberal-developmentalism and the highly hybrid In-Between Statism (see Kim, 2017).

The emergence of creative/cultural city policies and the resultant urban restructuring often involve a new round of dynamic and contingent (re)alignment of powerful actors and resources in accordance with specific local contexts. This calls for a careful and contextualized examination of both discursive and material practices in the making of creative/cultural cities. Local municipal governments who are pro-CCIs and equipped with various entrepreneurial strategies, and the grassroots creative class have formed two distinct forces shaping new urban spaces that differ significantly from Western cities. East Asian cities have thus gained value for a revisiting and interrogation of the established academic debates around the creative/cultural city, based primarily on Western experiences until recently, highlighting that urban studies “cannot be reduced to a few urban cores at the top of the hierarchy” (Castells, 2000, p. 380). To this end, this themed issue presents a fresh and enriched understanding of the making of creative/cultural cities in East Asia, and the emerging contestations based on two sets of interrelated analyses: first, a multi-scalar analysis of the role of the state in the making of creative/cultural cities and the various forms of creative and cultural clusters; and second, the discontent and resistance of the creative class and wider social groups, whose aspirations for and pursuits of creative/cultural cities are different from those top-down strategies. The socio-spatial landscapes of creative/cultural city making that are closely linked with wider politico-economic and socio-cultural transformations crisscrossing global-local and intergenerational boundaries, are (re)shaped jointly by these two concurring processes, both of which have remained largely unexplored in the East Asian context.

2. Making creative/cultural cities from above its contestations

The ‘SoHo model’ of the late 1970s and the “Guggenheim effect” of the late 1990s are two exemplary cases of how creative and cultural elements can be turned into the powerhouse of urban growth and wealth accumulation (Evans and Hutton, 2009; Plaza et al., 2009; Scott, 2006). Cities around the world thereafter have endeavored to replicate these successful models and to consciously incorporate creative/cultural city-making into their urban agendas (Kong, 2014; Scott, 2006, 2014). In the UK, for example, Cultural Quarters (CQs) gained popularity in the latter half of the twentieth century, and remain influential still today. As highlighted by García (2005), the outcomes of such large-scale cultural interventions have more to do with reimagining and rebranding of the city than the promotion of culture and creativity; but worse still, the expected returns on major investments into urban amenities are often overestimated (Evans, 2005; Jayne, 2004; Sasaki, 2010).

After being widely adopted as a panacea for economic stagnancy in

the post-industrial era, the development of CCIs has stretched far beyond the original foci to include various economic activities in pursuit of short-term returns, and in some cases these developments may not involve creativity or culture at all (Bailey et al., 2004; Evans, 2003; Miles, 2005; Richards and Wilson, 2004). For instance, in China, the mushrooming CCI parks and clusters do not necessarily contain substantive cultural and creative elements, and many have been turned into property development endeavors, featuring mix-used districts and high-end consumption space (He, this issue). Worse still, many of these CCI developments are packaged with real estate speculation disguised in their “creative” facades, which spawn widespread city beautification and gentrification, and barely cultivate any innovation or creativity (He, 2007; Keane, 2009; Wang et al., 2015).

During the process of cultural and creative zone development, the entrepreneurial, and inevitably speculative, nature of creative and cultural urban policies has led to a relentless displacement of incumbent residents, including grassroots artists, crafts industries and ordinary citizens, bringing about radical changes in the urban landscape, in existing creative and cultural clusters and in industrial heritage in various locations (Evans, 2005; Hutton, 2008; Kong, 2014). This is exemplified in the eviction of residents and the creative class from the entire block of the South of the Market (SoMa) area of San Francisco (Evans, 2005; Solnit and Schwartzberg, 2000), and the displacement of artists and residents in the pursuit of loft-living in New York and everywhere else (Evans, 2001; Zukin, 1989).

Not surprisingly, the discontent surrounding state-led creative/cultural city-making have often developed into protests, community movements, collective resistance and other forms of contestation involving the participation of creative/cultural workers, local small- and medium-scale industrial organizations, ordinary citizens and marginalized groups in activities to defend their right to the city. A case in point is the redevelopment of Mediaspree – part of Berlin’s waterfront regeneration in the early 2000s – which encountered massive resistance from the small-scale cultural enterprises and temporary users that had occupied the disused sites in the previous decade. The protest, led by a coalition of artists, cultural entrepreneurs, club owners and activists who initiated the temporary uses and were labelled “young creatives” by the Berlin Senate, finally succeeded in persuading investors and the local state to reconsider their redevelopment plans (Novy and Colomb, 2013; Scharenberg and Bader, 2009). Similar cases also can be found in the development of a creative/cultural economy in East Asia, including Seoul’s Dongdaemun History and Culture Park, in which the regeneration project eventually incorporated some of the previously resisting street vendors into the matrix of the creative city development project that initially sought to exclude them (Bowen, 2015); Busan’s Totatoga project, in which the informal creative class, who were previously ignored or even evicted by the local authorities, was eventually recognized as a valuable asset in the city’s cultural development strategies (Park, 2015); and Osaka, where top-down creative city policies failed, but a lively and inclusive grassroots movement led by artists and creative workers emerged and transformed Osaka into a socially-inclusive and culturally vibrant creative city (Sasaki, 2010).

Deeply rooted in the Confucian philosophy, and sharing, arguably, a common trajectory of developmentalism, East Asian creative/cultural urban policies have become an integral part of the broader national and urban development schemes, e.g. building global cities, and have served to consolidate and reproduce state power. Confronting the strong and powerful states, the protests and activism against the state-led CCI projects in many Asian cities are often more rigorously regulated than their Western counterparts, despite the few successful cases mentioned earlier. The making of creative/cultural cities and the surrounding contestations in East Asia thus cannot be fully understood through the conceptual lens of rent gap, gentrification, displacement, the right to the city, or urban entrepreneurialism alone, which require in-depth examinations into the delicate and ever-changing state-market-society relations, the shifting power structure among a

constellation of stakeholders, the intertwining of politico-economic and socioeconomic pursuits, and the unique cultural norms and preferences (He and Lin, 2015; He and Qian, 2017).

3. Making creative/cultural cities on the ground

The pro-market Richard Florida-style campaigns for creative/cultural cities have served as a convenient strategy for many mayors and policy-makers around the world, who are advised to tailor-make urban space to cater to the tastes of the creative class in order to craft a new engine for economic growth. The vaguely defined creative-class concept is in danger of shaping a stereotyped image of a cultural workforce that has formed a “small world” through its own stratification. Constituting this small world are those with “cool” jobs in “buzzing” places (Florida, 2000), and those who work on a project-by-project basis, and thus live in precarity (Oakley, 2011), although the boundary between these two is highly porous, and contingent on the temporal dimension.

Contrary to Florida’s advocating the building of “hip” places to attract a creative class, many spontaneously formed clusters of art and creative spaces are found in marginalized areas. On top of the cultural logics that glue the cultural community together, territoriality provides a crucial opportunity for individual members to form a cohesive and united social collective. This is particularly true for cultural nomads who have escaped from the mainstream values, economy and society, who are able to re-assemble their talents and themselves spatially in a different public space. Cases of these kind can be traced back to the mid-9th century when French artists migrated from Paris to the Barbizon village in Fontainebleau in search of the real proletariat life (see Wang and Li, 2018); and to the 1960s, when bohemians of all classes flooded into Greenwich Village to lead the imagined life of the penniless artists against the then celebrated consumerist capitalism (Gelder, 2007). Such a tendency still prevails in contemporary East Asian cities, as can be seen in the gathering of grassroots artists and graduates from the Central Academy of Arts in Beijing’s Yuanmingyuan village in the early 1990s, where a Barbizon-style art district was formed and subsequently cleansed by the government in 1995, due partially to its radical political propositions (Liu et al., 2013), and the community of artists that was relocated from the former Hong Kong Government Supplies Department Headquarters in Oil Street to a vacant former abattoir known as the Cattle Depot, where the development of the art district had to comply with rigorous government regulations (Kong, 2011).

What has made these cultural nomads more visible in ordinary city life is the growing artistic re-appropriation of urban space that has been planned in accordance with the capitalist logic, and thereafter experienced progressive privatization. In the recent resurgent wave of artistic practices, urban art functions as both a manifestation of the self and an act of resistance. The development of creative and artistic activism has been explosive in expanding its repertoire, thanks to the flexible usage of urban space, ranging from walls and pavements to such moving objects as trains and buses, as well as the fluid usage of public space in a wide variety of rhythms, such as flash movements. The reliance of these activist pursuits on the geographic and temporal dimension allows subversive political manifestations to be produced, propagated, and more importantly, socially engaged in by a much wider audience as part of an automated process (Debord, 1957). As Youkhana (2014, p. 173) puts it, “urban art activists drift through the city to discover porous spaces in the city for their creative performances”. Under the rigorous surveillance of the Asian states, it is not uncommon to see “creative” appropriations of the urban space, evidenced by the underground live houses in Tokyo that ignited the fire of the anti-MTV movement in Japan (Kyohei, 2011), the graffiti wall/war in Johor Bahru in which a mundane street was transformed into a disruptive spectacle (Lim, 2016), and the sticker-art posted on lampposts and park benches in Singapore (Luger, 2016), among others.

Nonetheless, as Hardt and Negri (2001) caution, capitalism must be

read as a reactive force that constantly re-capitalizes on new things, and creative and cultural activities on the ground are no exception: the bohemians in Greenwich village were gradually displaced by the Bobos, who appropriated the village as a location from which they could render their lives distinctive from the ordinary, non-artistic public (Zukin, 1989); art-in-residence schemes were launched by the government and developers to gain artistic dividends from many planned creative and cultural industrial parks (Mayer, 2016); and politically loyal artists were selected by the city-state government to carry out an official Graffiti Wall project to showcase the vibrancy of renaissance Singapore (Luger, 2016). In addition, as Neff et al. (2005, p. 331) argue, “cool” (artistic and creative) jobs usually glamorize risk, and “provide support for continued attacks on unionized work and for ever more market-driven, portfolio-based evaluations of workers’ value”. Worse still, while the (upcoming) elites are pursued proactively by various cultural/creative cities, other classes are struggling with, discriminated by and constantly squeezed out of these cultural/creative cities/zones; or more precisely, entrepreneurs in, workers out (Clarke, 2005). In the confrontation between the creative/artistic classes, who at times represent alternative political advocacies, at one end, and capital and the governing power on the other, artistic autonomy and cultural capitalization are two intertwining processes that deserve further scrutiny.

4. Toward a multi-scalar understanding of creative/cultural cities

Actively preaching and practicing the creative city strategies proposed by Florida (2000), East Asian megacities, such as Shanghai, Singapore, Taipei, Hong Kong and Seoul, are in the spotlight of creative/cultural city making, and can serve as “sites of experimentation” (Ong, 2011) in a critical examination of the variegated manifestation of the “universal” discourse of the creative city. It is worthy of note that, although Singapore is usually considered geographically to be a South-East Asian country, it is included in our discussion of East-Asian creative/cultural cities due mainly to its cultural and politico-economic proximity to the East Asian region in which the Confucius culture, the developmental state, the booming economy, and the authoritarian and/or quasi-democratic society reside. This themed issue includes five papers, each looking at a different façade of creative/cultural city making in five East Asian cities, from Shanghai to Beijing, and from Shenzhen to Taipei and Singapore. This collection of papers is the culmination of a workshop hosted in the City University of Hong Kong in June 2016, and these five papers represent a concerted effort to interrogate the role of the state in creative/cultural city making either as an auxiliary or suppressing player, or a mix of both, while not losing sight of the agency of the creative class and their contestations with the power of the state and capital. The first two papers by He and Lin & Chiu make a poignant criticism of the devastating role of the state in suffocating the sprouts of creativity to feed into their political and economic agendas. In Singapore, the “creative class” is striking back against the state, and generates frictions with the culturally-traditional middle and working class Singaporean (Lugar, this issue). Nonetheless, in other places, the creative and cultural seeds have come to “fruition” either by achieving commercial success in the global art market (Zhang, this issue) or spawning into politicized appeals that challenge mainstream social and political norms and present alternative forms of legitimized aesthetics (Wang and Li, this issue). Yet the agency of the creative class, be it the artists in Songzhuang, Beijing or the rockers in Shenzhen’s live houses, are barely able to circumvent the rigid censorship and political surveillance, as their survival strategies, or “guerrilla warfare” in Wang and Li’s terms, must align with the state’s selective and volatile cultural and economic policies. Furthermore, governments constantly adjust their governing techniques to maintain an upper hand in CCI development and cultural/creative city making.

Echoing Peck (2005) and others’ relentless criticism of the apolitical and unitary representation of cities by Richard Florida’s creative city thesis and its failure to address the acute worldwide problems of social

inequality and socio-spatial segregation. He proposes an analytical framework of the “creative spatio-temporal fix” to examine the spatial/physical forms and the temporal strategy of the “creativity fix” introduced by the Shanghai government, as well as the connections between entrepreneurial governance and the restructuring of the built environment under the creative city discourse. Exemplified by the case of Red Town, one of the factory-turned cultural and creative industrial clusters, the Shanghai government is employing creativity as a crisis management strategy in response to the predicaments of post-industrialization and land deficiencies through the construction of multi-scalar entrepreneurial urban governance networks, and is introducing various redevelopment strategies at different stages to achieve growth-oriented goals. Under the rubric of creative city making, various creative institutional designs have been introduced in the two rounds of the creative spatio-temporal fix: a temporal deferral of the crisis of deindustrialization and risky investment in the derelict industrial land in the first stage, albeit with a limited spatial reconfiguration; and a radical spatial restructuring to revamp the built environment and the application of a temporal fix through the introduction of financial capital in the redevelopment project in the second stage.

In a similar vein, Lin and Chiu’s paper reflects theoretically and empirically on the political rationality, the governing technologies and the resulting social exclusion within the intermingling processes of objectivization and subjectivization in Taipei’s articulation of a creative city building (CCB) agenda. Lin and Chiu lodge a strong critique towards the CCB policy exploited in Taipei as a new mode of governmentality, pinpointing the refusal of universal rationality, (post-)colonial governmentality and modernization. This paper documents the alienation, mutation and contradiction in practicing the CCB agenda, and demonstrates the failure of CCB policy to deliver urban outcomes. Essentially, the occidentalism of Taipei’s context is deployed as an effective tool in the reenergizing of the “not-so-global” city, and the somehow fetid developmental state that seeks to generate a new paradigm out of the CCB agenda. As Lin and Chiu demonstrate, the new industrial and urban transformation promised in the CCB agenda has failed to materialize, being tied up with the goals of sustaining a political rationality and legitimacy based on progressiveness and development, and the operationalization of this vision through activating and integrating local communities. Resonating the experiences of many other cities (Peck, 2005, McCann, 2007), the practice of CCB in Taipei reproduces the closure of cultural production and social exclusion, rather than the advocated inclusiveness, diversity and tolerance.

Lugar’s paper addresses several gaps in literature on cultural policy, “creative cities” and “creative resistance” by documenting the impacts of state-led creativity policies, particularly the many contestations, resistances and subversions in Singapore, as an authoritarian and quasi-democratic society that embraces art and culture as a state policy imperative that remains largely unexplored. Specifically, he documents how the “creative class”, or those who are envisioned as an “arts generation”, is striking back against the state via the platform provided by the state for the expression of critical views within authoritarian boundaries. This research goes further to investigate the class tensions that exist between the creative class, or “arts generation” and the culturally-traditional middle and working class Singaporean heartland, which enriches the international debates on creative resistance and cultural activism through a contextualized analysis. The Singaporean example highlights the limitations of the creative policy and its implementation process, the impacts, contestations and resistances of which are often notably constrained within elite urban cosmopolitanism, in which cultural producers have failed to join forces with a variety of broader causes, such as social and spatial justice, inequality and civil rights, to form activist alliances and networks. Ironically, being a privileged group, the art generation is unconsciously complicit with (authoritarian) state policies and agendas that they may not totally agree with.

Zhang employs a geographic political economy approach to

examine how political interests and local-global interactions have given rise to a leading art cluster in China, and how social and political governance mechanisms interact spatially. The study demonstrates how art production evolves from being state dominated and ideology-driven to partially-liberated and market-driven under the selective relaxation of political control and the rise of freelance artists in the post-Mao era. The paper interprets the mechanism behind the formation of an art district that results from an adaptive juxtaposition of repression and the promotion of art by the Chinese party-state in governing creative/cultural sectors under globalization and multi-scalar interaction. Zhang also draws our attention to the intertwining creativity in art, i.e. contemporary Chinese artists achieved international recognition and commercial success after the domestic repression of the previous era, and the creativity of the state in urban and industrial governance, i.e. sophisticated tactics of governance under fragmented authoritarianism, in response to the challenges imposed by marketization and globalization. The state has managed to skillfully harness and convert the creativity and popularity of independent artists into valuable resources and a new instrument of governance to serve its agenda in boosting economic growth and augmenting soft power. The complex spatio-temporal dynamics of China’s art districts can also be seen in the delicate relationship between two different art clusters, and the contrasting appreciation of the value of the artist community resulting from the significant urban-rural economic disparity and the fragmented governance within Beijing’s jurisdiction. As the authoritarian state strikes a delicate balance between repression and promotion, the agency of the art practitioners, who have skillful utilized social networks to negotiate their survival strategies, should not be overlooked. It is worth noting though that the function and spatiality of social networks are not independent of the state’s rules and regulations, but are actually channeled by and complementary to them, and the increasing bargaining power of the artists and the art district have in turn altered the power relations and condition of policy making.

Scrutinizing the territorial strategies used by the two antagonistic sides, i.e. the politicalizing actions of Chinese rockers aimed at challenging the existing order, and the authoritative actions of the state to consolidate the existing order, Wang and Li look at the transformation of rock space in Shenzhen as a form of spatial politicization in a guerrilla pattern, i.e. “guerrilla warfare”. As Wang and Li contend, the post-political forms of urban governance in China that extend governance to experts and professional practices has emerged as a means of city making. Ever since the Shenzhen government started developing a growing passion for cultural city making, it has engaged in selective activities from the governing side in picking and co-opting certain rock music producers and live houses, while collapsing and/or policing others to re-consolidate the spatial order. Similar to the approach of Zhang, Wang and Li examine the territorial strategies used by both “the police and the political”, i.e. the local government and the rockers, to consolidate the existing order and to assert a new order, respectively. As cities are converted into sites of propaganda through citizen entitlement and public participation programs, and the general public are immersed involuntarily in state-sanctioned aesthetics, rockers in live houses, often underground and spatially fluid, are coming to challenge mainstream social and political norms and to present an alternative order within the established regime of aesthetics.

As outlined above, these five papers focus on different aspects of creative/cultural city making at different scales, yet there are coherent themes that run through the issue, being the political economy approach to examining the indispensable role of the entrepreneurial state, and the anthropological account of the agency of the grassroots creative class. In addition, all of the papers in this themed issue highlight the heterogeneity and complexity of creative/cultural urban fields that should not to be considered independently of geographical and institutional contexts and political processes. It is our hope that this concerted effort can contribute to the unpacking of the complexity and peculiarity of the policies, practices and outcomes of, in particular the

contestations of East Asia's creative/cultural city making in its various forms and different scales. More importantly, we expect this collective research of creative/cultural cities in East Asia to add to the growing body of work challenging urban theories based on the Anglo-American world, which can be of limited utility in understanding urbanism elsewhere (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009).

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