Book Review

Cultural policies in East Asia. Dynamics between the State, Arts and Creative Industries

Hye-Kyung Lee and Lorraine Lim (eds), published by Palgrave Macmillan 2014 (228 pages).

Reviewer

Kate MacNeill

This book will be widely welcomed for the insights it provides on the state of cultural policy in five East Asian states: Singapore, China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. An exhaustive treatment of the subject is not the ambition of book, nor do the editors attempt to present an analysis of each country according to an overarching framework. Indeed what is most impressive is the way in which each chapter captures an essence of a nation’s individual socio-economic and cultural history or contemporary context. Yet at the same time themes emerge which resonate across these diverse sites.

The book combines newly emerging aspects of cultural policy with more nuanced understanding of existing knowledge. It is organised around three broad themes: cultural policy as a project of nation building; the negotiation of culture between the government, private sector and the artistic community; and the evolution of a creative industries policy framework. This framing allows the authors to present a contemporary snapshot of government priorities, the agency of non-government players and the dynamic tension between state ambitions, private interests and individual expression of culture.

Inevitably in a project of this nature, there are slippages in nomenclature across chapters, and ‘culture’ continues to be an ambiguous and contested term. Nonetheless, each chapter is sufficiently detailed so as to contextualise the usage of the term – at times as a reference to art production, at other times at the level of community, and most pervasively in the context of a cultural policy text, in reference to state-based efforts to frame a national identity.

A number of chapters provide useful overviews of distinctive national trends in cultural policy. Michael Keane and Elaine Jing Zhao trace the changing discourse of the cultural and creative industries in China. They highlight the shift to ‘created in China’ rather than ‘made in China’, coinciding with a change from national cultural hegemony to a more grassroots approach to cultural practices enabled through informal economies and online communities. The authors observe that in practice, much of the innovation draws on a shanzhai (copy culture) in the form of micro-innovations that value add, starting out by cloning but adding additional features, in what Keane and Elaine Jing Zhao refer to as ‘re-made in China’. As explicated in Li-jung Wang’s chapter on concepts of national identity, different challenges face framers of Taiwanese cultural policy as the dominance of Chinese culture as national culture has ceded ground to an emerging Taiwanese consciousness. Here the focus is on the way in which an accommodation is found between a Chinese central culture and Taiwanese local culture, both existing alongside a growing awareness of a multicultural Taiwan and the presence of distinct cultures associated with migrant workers. In contrast, Kiwon Hong explores the enthusiasm for, and limitations of, Korea’s efforts to create a form of nation branding. In this instance the balancing act...
facing the government is one of enthusiastically promoting a Korean way of life and cultural and entertainment industries through the promotion of the ‘Korean way’, while at the same time avoiding overt forms of government interventions that might too closely resemble cultural imperialism.

Other chapters examine the way in which cultural policy is enacted and created through agents of the government and negotiated at the bureaucratic level. Terence Chong’s chapter on the bureaucratic imagining undertaken by the Singaporean government over the past few decades provides a fascinating explanation of the way in which the state machinery is enmeshed in the Singaporean project of nation building. In this city state, the creation, promotion and implementation of cultural policy is compressed and the imperatives of the government are also those of its agents and citizens. Cultural governance is also the theme of Jerry C.Y. Liu’s interrogation of historical and contemporary cultures of the civil service in Taiwan. Drawing on the Ming dynasty’s detailed record-keeping he demonstrates the way in which the emperors’ commitment to cultural governance was encouraged and policed in correspondence on the part of Chinese people reminding the emperor of his duties. He argues that the contemporary entry exams for civil servants in Taiwan perpetuates this practice of self-management mechanisms by which civil servants are selected on the basis of their capacity and willingness to maintain a Confucian centred moral-ethical order. This provides the basis for what Liu refers to as a reOrienting of cultural governance, which would see eastern cultural values intermingled with western bureaucratic efficiencies.

As noted, culture itself is an ambiguous concept in both academic discourse and as a descriptor of creative practices. In the absence of an autonomous tradition of arts and cultural activity, it is arts and cultural policies that give shape to what constitutes culture directly by way of government financial support and indirectly through government imprimatur. The recent history of Korean arts organisations is presented by Hye-Kyung Lee as one in which the government’s focus on culture as a producer of content met with little resistance as neither progressive nor conservative groups within the arts and activist communities could articulate a more inclusive rationale for cultural activity. A consequence of State promotion of arts and cultural policies would appear to be a diminution in an independently organising arts community which, while sharing diverse political views, has a common interest in building the creation of, and respect for, a lively arts and cultural sector capable of articulating its worth. In contrast, Lorraine Lim draws attention to the way in which the arts community in Singapore is closely integrated with aspirations on the part of a number of Singaporeans for more freedom in self-expression, both artistically and as citizens. In contrast to the framing of Korea as a country which has bypassed a middle-class cultural aspiration, the arts in Singapore appears to be one site in which political aspirations are expressed.

In a chapter that shifts focus from national identity to consider a regional diasporic identification as Chinese, Anthony Y.H. Fung traces the Chinese government’s recognition of the powerful potential that online gaming has to promote favourable interpretations of cultural and heroic identities to Chinese people beyond its borders. In an analysis of the identities and cultural specificity of two online games, Fung demonstrates the way in which a Chinese cultural identity is promoted through the use of soft power to the regional Chinese population.

Moving to more local manifestations of policy Mari Kobayashi’s chapter examines the way in which local cultural policy in Japan has been delegated to local governments to promote culture and arts relevant to the particular region. Using case studies from Shizuoka Prefecture and Koganei City, Kobayashi traces the evolution from administrative initiative to autonomous arts organisation. In the aftermath of the 1996 Hanshin-Awaji earthquake non-government arts organisations came to the fore, working through a form of cultural democracy, in collaboration between local government, private companies and arts not-for-profit organisations.
Xin Gu demonstrates the particular form that a creative cluster development policy has taken in Shanghai using a case study of one particular cluster, M50. A combination of urban regeneration and public–private partnership, M50 utilises now-abandoned industrial sites within the city, rather than traditional sites of creativity and innovation. However, despite its appearance as a ground-up, organic initiative, it has a corporate structure and is the subsidiary of a major property management and development corporation, listed on the Chinese stock exchange. Further, the venture is highly subsidised by the state in a way that is far from obvious, allowing M50 to retain the appearance of independence.

Hsiao-Ling Chung’s chapter traces the way in which Taiwan has adopted its own particular interpretation of creative industries policies and combined these with a focus on local cultural values within a policy framework of cultural and creative industries. Combined with the emergence of the creative city as a site in which these industries might best be realised, Taiwan has identified five municipalities as the mechanism through which local level cultural and creative industries would emerge and, to some extent, be governed. A number of these municipalities combine a metropolitan core with a surrounding rural district, with government planners and officers expected to realise the ambitions of both city and rural residents. Chung’s focus is on the soft infrastructure that is necessitated by such a model, whereby networks of stakeholders begin to form around physical infrastructure buildings, so as to facilitate the collaboration with local communities. Based on interviews with local government offices, the chapter provides an insight into the day-to-day challenges in ensuring that the local community retains a stake in the broader approach of infrastructure development.

Nobuko Kawashima’s chapter describes the impact that an absence of government policy has had in the Japanese film industry. Enjoying a market driven resurgence, the film industry has its critics in that quality, diversity and cultural integrity of the film industry may well be a victim of this growth. An awareness that the more spectacular Hollywood productions are not so satisfying to Japanese audiences has led to new entrants into the film market such as Kadakowa and Japanese television companies. A competitive exhibition environment has in turn assisted in allowing for distribution of a wider range of local film product, yet Kawashima observes that this has not ensured that Japanese culture is sufficiently represented in the films being produced.

A review of this length cannot do justice to the sophisticated level at which the authors have engaged with these diverse themes. The chapters are sufficiently distinctive so as to ensure that no reader is left with any doubts as to the nuanced differences and subtle similarities that are drawn out in the book. The editors have resisted the frequently adopted framing introduction to each section, leaving the material to speak for itself and for the reader to make of it what they wish. This reader felt both sated yet keen for more, gaining a glimpse into a much deeper body of knowledge that is only recently becoming available to monolingual English speaking scholars and students alike. A number of chapters from this book will be finding their way into university course guides and will hopefully in turn produce more scholarship.