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Cultural icons and urban development in Asia: Economic imperative, national identity, and global city status[☆]

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Abstract

Global cities are characterized by the multiplicity of flows that they are implicated in – flows of people, goods, services, ideas, and images. Yet, global cities do not derive their status only on the basis that they are networked nodes. They also require particular forms of cultural capital. Cities with global aspirations have thus increasingly recognized the need to accumulate cultural capital, for which one means is to create new urban spaces, in particular, new cultural urban spaces (e.g. grand theatres, museums, libraries). These often monumental structures are intended to support a vibrant cultural life, in order to attract and sustain global human and economic flows. In this paper, I examine the efforts by Shanghai's, Singapore's and Hong Kong's governments to develop cultural icons as part of the strategy to help their cities gain global city status, and in the process, constructing shared national and city identities. I illustrate how such efforts are not universally interpreted in the manner intended, with city populations sometimes protesting, sometimes simply oblivious. At the same time, I argue that such strategies to achieve global city status are sometimes at odds with projects of nationhood.

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Keywords: Shanghai; Singapore; Hong Kong; Cultural icon; Cultural capital; Global city

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Introduction

What are global cities, and what are their roles in the construction of nations? In much of the literature, global cities have been characterised as networked nodes, with multiple and intensive global flows of people, goods, services, ideas, and images. Global cities often share more in common, have more to do with, and identify more with other global cities than with other cities and hinterlands in their own countries. Given these myriad outward linkages and external orientation, the question arises — are efforts at attaining global city status at odds with projects of nationhood, which essentially emphasise the building of internal ties? I invite the reader to pause and keep this question in mind for a moment.

Another body of literature on the global city examines new urban spaces as outcomes of global ebbs and flows. The focus is less on the flows themselves, but on the spatial impress of the flows. Most commonly, research has centred on the urban impress of economic globalization, as illustrated by the literature on urban megaprojects (e.g. Olds, 1995, 2001). These new megaprojects entail the development of a mix of retail, industrial, leisure, residential, infrastructural and/or other facilities on large tracts of land. Examples include Lujiazui Central Area in Shanghai's Pudong, and Canary Wharf in London. Increasingly, attention has also been given to the cultural production of space and place, often in monumental proportions, as a means of attracting and sustaining global human and economic flows. These cultural icons constitute part of urban imaging strategies (e.g. Chang, 1997; Kearns & Philo, 1993), and occur alongside the remaking of local places and identities through the (re)invention of place-based heritage (e.g. Logan, 2001).

In this paper, I would like to examine particularly the cultural production of new urban spaces. I wish to underscore the point that global city status is not achieved solely by virtue of the multiplicity of flows a city is implicated in. Rather, global city status requires particular forms of cultural capital, which aspiring global cities seek to develop in what may be characterised as a three-fold strategy: a people-oriented strategy, a product-oriented strategy, and a place-oriented strategy (Kim, 2001). A people-oriented strategy focuses on human development, cultivating cultural producers and consumers for the global city. A product-oriented strategy emphasises the creation of cultural products. A place-oriented strategy involves infrastructure and property development. Such cultural infrastructure should facilitate cultural activities, embody cultural ambience, and support cultural ballast. The global city must at the very least support cultural institutions such as museums, theatres and libraries, which should in turn sustain global flows by attracting capital investment and drawing tourists through contributing to an urban image befitting a global city, and supporting a culturally enriched lifestyle. While much attention in the literature on global cities has focused on global flows of people, investments, goods and services, I will focus my attention in this paper on the cultural imprints on a cityscape that contribute to its global city-ness. In particular, I ask the following questions: what efforts have cities put in to develop the cultural infrastructure that can help them gain global city status, and how successful are they?

By now, I have outlined two sets of questions: (a) how a global city challenges or strengthens the sense of the national; and (b) the role of iconic cultural infrastructural developments in strategies to achieve global city status. Taken in conjunction, my main concern in this paper is to ask how the strategy of developing cultural monuments as a strategy to achieve global city status contributes to or is at odds with national agendas and projects of nationhood. The answer to this is multifaceted and contingent on geographic specificity. It is therefore important to ask these questions in particular contexts.

Three aspiring cities

There are more than a few cities that aspire to global city status. Indeed, as Tamotsu (2002:58) quite rightly summarises:

The major cities of Asia have entered an era of fierce competition in which success depends on a city's ability to draw capital from the region and the world, attract corporations to set up offices, and bring in visitors, including business travelers, participants in international conferences, and tourists. ...This can be summed up as megacompetition among countries and cities to increase their "soft power".

To address my research questions, I have chosen to analyse Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore, three cities in dynamic Asia selected for their similarities and simultaneous differences. All have fairly recently (re)constructed their cultural icons or are in the process of doing so. Singapore's Esplanade, National Library and Singapore History Museum, Shanghai's Museum, Library and Grand Theatre, and Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District all come to mind easily. Yet, they have varied economic trajectories, and different nation-building imperatives. Singapore is emerging well from the Asian financial crisis and is a young nation, just 40, and by now, constituted largely of second and third generation migrants. It is a city-state, and city and nation identities are coincident. Hong Kong is still struggling to shake off economic problems. It is constitutionally and territorially a part of China, but with significant autonomy as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) except in foreign affairs and defence issues. It is arguably also not a part of the national project, with scarcely a sense of the larger Chinese 'nation' (Fung, 2001). Shanghai is booming economically, and is historically known to have been the most outward-looking city in China, with much foreign influence. It desires to challenge Beijing's cultural position within that vast country. Through an analysis of these three cities, I draw some conclusions about the role of the cultural built environment in national and global projects, and the contradictions and confluences therein.

Particularly, I argue in this paper that state and/or municipal governments in all three places use place-based strategies as a means of accruing cultural capital. Because of the very visibility and materiality of these urban landscapes, the development of monuments dedicated to cultural use (e.g. museum, library, theatre, cultural district) is a popular state and city strategy in the competition for global city status. While there may be other cultural strategies (e.g. exporting cultural products such as film or importing foreign talent such as designers and animators), it is often the construction of the visible and material, particularly in large proportions, that is favoured as a means of offering tangible evidence of support for cultural production and which can literally be pointed to as forms of cultural capital. Yet, as I will also show, there exists a range of differentiated consumption of place meanings, often discontinuous and fragmented, suggesting that the cultural capital desired by state and city agencies may have little meaning for segments of the city population.

Data collection in these three cities was qualitative in nature. I conducted interviews with about 20 "ordinary" residents in each city from different walks of life between May and September 2005. I also engaged in participant observation activities (particularly at the selected cultural monument sites where I watched performances in theatres and walked the museums, observing and interviewing visitors). Textual material in the form of newspaper reports was also analysed.

Urban boosterism: architectural symbols, urban flagships and urban megaprojects

Urban boosterism is about projecting a positive image of a city, so as to attract investors, professionals and white-collar workers. Such boosterism typically relies on strategies like architectural iconism and monumentalism, and the construction of urban flagship megaprojects, but they are not limited to landscape and place strategies. Often, these are complemented by efforts to create a vibrant city for living, working and playing, for example, through the hosting of hallmark events, and the encouragement of arts and cultural activities. All these place, people and activities-based strategies contribute to the accumulation of cultural capital for the city. In other words, a city with significant cultural capital and therefore a greater likelihood to be deemed a global city is one that has imageable and striking buildings, often designed by famous international architects, distinctive heritage structures, world-renowned performances and exhibitions, a lively entertainment scene, a creative buzz in a highly liveable space, populated by a globally oriented population. Additionally, in order that such “utopian” spaces are made widely known to the world, branding and imaging exercises have been adopted.

In this paper, my focus is on the material strategies of effecting landscape and place change because of the “central importance of the materiality and visibility of the building” (King, 1996:101). As King (1996:101) further argues, “It is always the image of the building — rarely the diffuse and ungraspable ‘city’, and even less, the ‘imagined community’ of the nation — which is used to fix our gaze...”. This is not to deny the importance of other strategies, but to emphasise that for many cities, the landscape and place strategies tend to be first among equals due to their high visibility.

The skyscraper is the architectural form that has dominated the imaginations of city-planners charged with ensuring that their cities come out well in the competition for global attention. Today, “the massive high rise tower is...being used by some Asian countries as a magic wand, stuck metaphorically into the terrestrial globe, to transform what used to be known (in the increasingly obsolescent categories of the 1950s), as the Third World into the First World” (King, 1996:105). This form of architectural monumentalism or “gigantism” (King, 1996) has for long been favoured as the symbol of corporate power, personal ambition and city pre-eminence. The strategy is evident in many cities in different parts of the world through many city’s history: Chicago’s Sears Tower, London’s Natwest Tower and Lloyd’s Insurance Building, Hong Kong’s Nina Tower, Shanghai’s Oriental Pearl Television Tower, and Malaysia’s Petronas Twin Towers are all cases in point. Clearly, their presence alone cannot warrant global city status, as some of these examples show, though they are certainly significant urban symbols that many global cities have as part of their cultural capital. As Yi-Fu Tuan wrote in 1974 about urban symbols, they are those structures that “capture the public’s imagination through novelty and sheer size”, or those that “capture a widely-shared historical sentiment” (Tuan, 1974:200). They play a key role in making a city known. Skyscrapers have played that role in many cities (see also Cybriwski, 1991; Domosh, 1988; Fenske & Holdsworth, 1992; Ford, 1998; McNeill, 2005; Ning & Yan, 1995; Vale, 1992).

Besides the symbolically rich skyscraper, flagship developments of mega-proportions have also been adopted as a strategy to enhance a city’s attractiveness and remake its image. Flagship developments are “significant, high profile and prestigious land and property developments which play an influential and catalytic role in urban regeneration” (Bianchini et al., 1992, cited in Temelova, 2005:5). They are usually within a definable area, with a purpose to “mark out change for the city”, but this change is envisaged to extend “beyond the physical boundaries of the flagship and contributes to the development and the economic and policy base of the area

and city” (Smyth, 1995:3). As Smyth (1995:5) further highlights, a flagship essentially is “a development in its own right”, “a marshalling point for further investment” and “a marketing tool for an area or city” (see also Olds, 1995 on megaprojects). Flagship developments are often, though not invariably, associated with “culture-led” regeneration efforts given the belief that cultural policy has a substantial impact on place image and thus attracts visitors and businesses to their shores (OECD Symposium, 2005:7). An example of such a cultural flagship boasting a high profile innovative design is the controversial Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao by Frank Gehry. Here, we have the shift from structures that “scrape” the sky (privileging height), to other kinds of urban symbols and monumentalism, privileging architectural design and iconic status, but with similar goals, to boost city competitiveness, contribute to economic regeneration, and offer a source of civic pride and social cohesion (De Frantz, 2005).

These ideas of architectural symbols, urban flagships and megaprojects, with their underlying political and economic imperatives, help to frame my discussion about cultural monuments in cities aspiring to global city status. Their roles in marketing the cities they are in will become apparent in my discussion below, as well as the confluences and contradictions between global city aspirations, national imperatives, and local everyday lives.

Global aspirations

Shanghai

In 1999, *Time* magazine labeled Shanghai a rival to New York City as the “Center of the World” in the 21st century (Yatsko, 2001:9). Others think “not yet”. Writing in 2000, Wu (2000:1359) declared that Shanghai was “still not comparable with a truly global city” though Shahid Yusuf and Wu (2002:1213), 2 years later, believed it to be a “regional aspirant” with “reasonable long-term prospects”.

Whatever others may think, Shanghai itself has clear and overt aspirations to be part of the race for global city status. Certainly, Shanghai’s history in the 1920s as financial and cultural centre means that it has a past that it can harken back to. The city’s determination today is described as one of “seeking revenge” – to regain its status as a leader among cities in the world (Lu, 2002:171). It is also aggressively using as reference points cities like London, seeking after “multinational investment, tourist income and a flowering of the arts” (Wu, 2002:168). In 2003, it proclaimed publicly its goal to increase the expatriate population to 5% of the metropolitan total, a level recognized as standard for global cities (Farrer, 2005). This aspiration finds expression through many individuals in the city who have a role to help realize its ambitions. Yatsko (2001:11), for example, reports the personal conviction of a deputy director at the foreign affairs department of the Shanghai Foreign Economic and Trade Commission in 1996: “Shanghai”, the young woman said, “won’t be a centre just for China – that’s too small. It will be a leader in the world.”

Pervasive evidence exists of Shanghai’s multifold efforts to situate itself prominently in the global urban hierarchy. There are mushrooming skyscrapers, massive redevelopment and relocation of residents, and new infrastructure projects. Old neighbourhoods have been flattened, elevated highways, extension bridges, roads, light rail system, digital telecommunication lines, a new international airport and cultural complexes have all been constructed. On the eastern side of the Huangpu River, Pudong’s new financial district Lujiazui is a shining edifice housing financial and business services that form the backbone of the city’s quest for global city status. On the western side of the river in Puxi, old factories have been moved out and replaced with

commercial buildings. Neon lights and billboards have emerged abundantly. To make all of this possible, massive amounts of capital have been invested in urban infrastructure. In the pre-reform era, infrastructure investments were deemed to be unproductive and were constrained by strict planning procedures and the management of capital construction investment (Wu, 2000:1371). In 1978, infrastructure investment in Shanghai was only 0.446 billion Chinese yuan. Between 1992 and 1997, infrastructural investment exploded to seven times more than during the whole of the 1980s (Yatsko, 2001:26). The rapid changes to the Shanghai landscape in the late 1990s were such that the authorities had to print a new city map every 3 months on average (Lu, 2002:169).

Singapore

Like Shanghai, Singapore, too, has global aspirations to be in the superleague of cities. Indeed, some argue that it can already claim global city status (Baum, 1999:1098), as a “linchpin of the new global capitalism” (Chua, 1993:105). This is in part on account of its physical infrastructure – its “efficient transport system and telecommunications network, modern and efficient airport and sea terminals, efficient business districts and a highly developed public housing system, all of which act to strengthen the city-state’s global competitiveness” (Baum, 1999:1098). It is also a function of Singapore’s “international presence as a major commercial and financial centre as well as a significant location for the regional headquarters of major multinational corporations (Lim & Choo, 1995:90). Baum (1999:1098) points to the increasingly “global reach of both the economy and society”, evidenced by the “numbers of foreign-controlled companies, the amount of foreign capital invested in Singapore and the extent of international transport flows, both cargo and passenger”. These “passenger” flows, in turn, are of multiple hues, ranging from the business and professional class, to unskilled immigrant workers, to tourists.

As a city-state, this global orientation has major implications on the ways in which Singaporeans understand the meaning of the “nation”, and how the government is engaged in the project of nation building. Rather than submit to what some researchers warn to be the demise of the nation with globalization (Gereffi, 1996; Guehenno, 1995; Ohmae, 1995), the government of Singapore has since independence in 1965 engaged in a series of projects in the construction of “nation” (Hill & Lian, 1995; Kong & Yeoh, 2003), including social and spatial strategies pertaining to housing, education, language, race, religion and community development. Cultural policy and cultural infrastructure have similarly been pressed to service.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong’s global aspirations are nowhere more apparent than in the former Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa’s 1999 Policy Address when he talked about the need for Hong Kong to have a long-term development plan that can make Hong Kong “world class” like London and New York (Policy Address, 1999). In 2000, Hong Kong’s Commission on Strategic Development produced a Commission Report titled “Bringing the Vision to Life – Hong Kong’s Development Needs and Goals” which crystallized the vision in greater depth and outlined the strategies to realize the vision. Central to achieving Hong Kong’s aspiration as “Asia’s World City” is the need for Hong Kong to reinforce its role as a major city in China and establish itself within a fully integrated “city-region” in the Pearl River Delta (Commission Report, 2000:5). The other interrelated themes identified in the report include enhancing of Hong Kong’s

competitiveness, improving the quality of life and reinforcing Hong Kong's identity and image. While the political administration within Hong Kong is convinced that the strengthening of linkages with the mainland is crucial for Hong Kong's climb up the world ranks, some fear Hong Kong could be increasingly overshadowed by its integration into the Pearl River Delta, or overtaken by major Chinese cities like Shanghai (Forrest, La Grange, & Yip, 2004:224), or whittled to become yet another large provincial city of China (Skeldon, 1997). Global aspirations notwithstanding, the path does not appear clear.

Regardless, Hong Kong's colonial past has allowed it to grow as an international, cosmopolitan centre, well-placed for integration into the world stage. Indeed, the then Chief Secretary for Administration has asserted that, in the areas of financial services, infrastructure, communications technology and tourism, Hong Kong is considered to have achieved world city status (Tsang, 2005), garnering a reputation to be a place which works and where deals are secured (Fung, 1999). It is certainly working towards higher value-added outputs through innovation and increasing the knowledge content of its economy to sustain its economic development (Tung, 2005). There are also calls for Hong Kong to place greater focus on attracting world-renowned tertiary institutions, improving its environmental quality, enhancing its entertainment facilities and reviewing its immigration laws, all in the bid to attract and retain world-class talent within Hong Kong (Dorfman). This provides the context for understanding some of Hong Kong's urban development strategies, of which the West Kowloon Cultural District is one.

Cultural infrastructure

Shanghai

While the majority of recent infrastructural developments in Shanghai has focused on making space for finance and commerce, cultural infrastructure has not been neglected – the establishment of cultural complexes as well as the preservation of local heritage structures – in recognition of their role in the making of global cities. In a strong bid to bring Shanghai to the level of regional rivals like Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Singapore, culture has been made a major priority (The New York Times, 2004). The old Shanghai Club, Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank building, Cathay Hotel, and other historic buildings of the 1920s are being preserved (Wu, 1999:214). But the focus of my paper is on the new cultural icons that the city has built as part of its cultural strategy to renew its cosmopolitan reputation. Shanghai's cultural strategy is to focus on constructing big buildings. Between 1990 and 1995, an average of 1 billion Chinese yuan (approximately US\$120 million) was invested annually in the development of cultural infrastructure. That amount was projected to double to 2 billion Chinese yuan a year for the period 1996–2000 (Kuai, 2000:7). Since the early 1990s, the Shanghai city government alone has invested US\$230 million in cultural infrastructure in the city centre, the highest in any Chinese city (The International Herald Tribune, 2005). The total Shanghai city government investment is estimated to represent only about 10% of the total investments in the development of Shanghai's cultural infrastructure between 1995 and 2004 (Wang & Ye, 2000:39).

The construction of cultural infrastructure in Shanghai represents its drive to become China's cultural centre, in addition to being its commercial centre:

Shanghai Mayor Xu Kuangdi...[in October 1996] talked proudly of Shanghai's cultural plans, revealing the administration's focus on big symbolic projects: "We not only want

to improve our economy. Even more important is to raise the city's cultural level. We can't become an economically great city, but a cultural desert" (Yatsko, 2001:142).

More ambitiously, Shanghai aspires not only to be the cultural centre in China but also to be among the best internationally. The executive director of the Shanghai Museum expressed this clearly: "Shanghai's museums and cultural centres don't just aim to be the best in China. We're competing to be among the best in the world" (Irish Times, 2000).

This cultural quest is not anchored only in cultural ambitions but it also has economic motivations as well. As with several other Asian countries (see Kong, Gibson, Khoo, & Semple, 2006), Shanghai is alert to the value of "creative capital" as a way of enticing capital of a more conventional sort. Drawing from authors like John Howkins and Richard Florida, Shanghai is seeking to offer cultural infrastructures to attract the creative classes (The International Herald Tribune, 2005). It is in this context that new cultural infrastructure has been constructed, such as the Shanghai Museum, the Shanghai Grand Theatre, and the Shanghai Library (see Table 1).

The museum's and theatre's location in People's Square is geographically and symbolically significant. They are situated very near to the geographical heart of the city,¹ and simultaneously occupy a symbolic political centrality, given the proximity to the Shanghai government's headquarters. That this is also one of the most expensive plots of land in Shanghai reflects the value placed on cultural development in Shanghai's quest for global city status. As Clément (2004:148) suggests, this use of the city centre is reminiscent of the placement of the "great public altars dedicated to the worship of the cult of ancestors and the gods of agriculture" in central sites, "consolidat[ing] the base of political power, accompanying and reinforcing it". That these cultural facilities are bestowed this prominence of location is a message to the world that Shanghai's new urban planning policy recognizes the centrality of culture. Simultaneously, the readiness to engage foreign expertise in the construction of the Shanghai Grand Theatre is a reflection of the growing collaboration between foreign architects and the architectural institutes of Shanghai – the intertwining of global and local in the production of space and meaning.

Singapore

As a city-state, and one ceaselessly engaged in the project of nation building and construction of national identity while striving for global city status, the Singapore government's urban, national and global ambitions are all intertwined. Cultural monuments are national monuments in the same way that they are monuments to the global city. In both government-led efforts as well as civic (including artistic) community activity, there is evidence of a search for local cultural identity, which is interpreted as a national identity, by which Singapore is to distinguish itself in the global arena.

Cultural ambitions in Singapore are expressed in terms of a desire to be a "Renaissance city" and a "global city for the arts". While an earlier cultural discourse emphasized the identification of a national identity, much of the later discourse and especially that of the last 5 years focuses on harnessing the economic potential of arts and culture (Kong, 2000; Kong et al., 2006). For example, Singapore's cultural policy in the 1960s and 1970s was focused primarily

¹ In November 1950, in order to unify Shanghai's surface coordinate system, Shanghai Bureau of Land Administration took a full survey of the whole city, and defined the central flag pole on top of Park Hotel as the Zero Center Point of Shanghai (Shanghai Surveying and Mapping Administration, Shanghai Park Hotel, April 1998 plaque). Park Hotel sits on Nanjing East Road by People's Square.

Table 1
Key examples of new cultural infrastructure in Shanghai, Singapore and Hong Kong

City	Building	History	New building	Unique features/circumstances
Shanghai	Shanghai Museum	Formerly in Nanjing Xi Road from 1952, and then moved to a 1930s bank building at South Henan Road in 1959.	Southern side of People's Square, in the heart of the city. 38,000 m ² . Opened 1995. Designed by the Shanghai Institute of Architectural Design and Research.	Iconic building, with a round top and square base in the shape of an ancient Tang vessel. Highly acclaimed internationally as the "finest museum of Chinese art in the world" (Yatsko, 2001:142).
	Shanghai Grand Theatre		Opened 1998. 2.1 ha in People's Square, next to Shanghai Municipal Building, opposite to the Shanghai Museum. Designed by ARTE-Charpentier Studio, France and ECADI, Shanghai.	A luminous structure of white steel and glass, offers state-of-the-art theatres and sound systems.
	Shanghai Library	Founded in 1952. A public comprehensive research library. Formerly spread over five locations.	On Huaihai Zhong Lu, a key retail street. Designed by Shanghai Architectural Design Institute and completed in 1997.	One of the largest in the world. Over 10 million books and 30 million items of research material.
Singapore	Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay	—	Opened in 2002. Comprises a 1600 seat concert hall, three smaller theatres, and a 2000 seat Lyric Theatre.	Envisioned to cater to the 240 million people in the region, not only the 3 million in Singapore.
	National Museum (NM) of Singapore, Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM)	Raffles Library & Museum established in 1887. Renamed National Museum in 1969. Became Singapore History Museum in 1996.	Singapore History Museum underwent extensive redevelopment, now known as the National Museum of Singapore. Reopened in 2006. SAM and ACM are new museums established in 1996 and 1997, respectively. All under the National Heritage Board.	National Museum two and a half times its former size.
	National Library	Well-loved red-bricked low-rise former building in Stamford Road torn down to make way for redevelopment.	New high rise building in Victoria Street in the colonial heart of the city. Opened in July 2005.	Won awards for environmentally friendly building.
Hong Kong	West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD)	Concept proposal invited in 2001. 40-ha waterfront area at West Kowloon for integrated arts, cultural and entertainment district. To house theatres, museums, an amphitheatre, an art exhibition centre, piazzas, as well as commercial and residential development. Distinctive Norman Foster-designed canopy.		Originally scheduled for completion in 2008 but due to opposition, fate hanging in the balance. May complete in 2011 at best.

on how artistic and cultural activities could be used for nation-building purposes and especially how the negative influences associated with “yellow culture” of the “decadent West” were to be avoided (Kong, 2000).

By the late 1980s, some attention began to be given to the importance of the arts for “personal enrichment”, that is, “broaden[ing] our minds and deepen[ing] our sensitivities”; to “improve the general quality of life”, “strengthen our social bond” and “contribute to our tourist and entertainment sectors” (Report of the Advisory Council, 1989:3). The report led to the establishment of the National Arts Council (NAC) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) in the mid 1990s to spearhead the development of the arts and heritage in Singapore. Some of the recent landscape infrastructure changes (e.g. museums) have been their responsibility (see Table 1).

The burst of attention to the creative/cultural economy came about mainly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, though there was a brief period in the early 1990s when some attention was given to the creative industries (see Kong, 2000). In 2000, the *Renaissance City Report* (MITA, 2000) was produced, followed by a green paper by the then Ministry of Information and the Arts (now Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts – MICA) titled *Investing in Singapore’s Cultural Capital* (MITA, 2002) and a *Creative Industries Development Strategy* by the Economic Review Committee (ERC, 2002). As part of such a development strategy, three reports were produced, focusing on how to develop the economic potential of the arts and culture, media, and design, respectively. This has led to further attention being paid to the development and enhancement of cultural infrastructures.

In brief, over the last 5 years, the Singapore government has recognized particularly the economic value of “creative” events and products, including arts, culture and heritage, and the need for appropriate landscapes and buildings to facilitate their development.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is of course most commonly associated with commerce, so that in late 1998, then Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa had to acknowledge the importance of the arts to Hong Kong’s future in his policy address to put it squarely on the agenda. Consequently, a number of reports and policy documents were produced on the creative industries in Hong Kong, testimony to the government’s desire to exploit this potential further (HKADC, 2000; HKDOT, 2002; HKDSCI, 2002; HKGCC, 2003; HKTDC, 2001, 2002).

The key narrative strands in Hong Kong’s policy discourse are very similar to Singapore’s. Creative industries are to facilitate the building of Asia’s world city, just as they are to serve as a trigger for economic development, and enhance the city as a place for quality living, thus promoting tourism and attracting investment. Further, artistic creation is viewed as a “cohesive agent in building community identity”, “allow[ing] local citizens as well as visitors a deeper understanding of the Hong Kong spirit” (HKADC, 2000:6).

It is in this context that the proposed West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) is to be developed (see Table 1), to allow Hong Kongers to find a “cultural oasis to enrich [their] lives”, and an attraction to bring in more overseas visitors (Press release, <http://vn-ww.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200202/28/0228222.htm>). Significantly, in the call for proposals, global ambition was clearly articulated: the WKCD would be a “landmark development” that would “enhance Hong Kong’s position as a world city of culture” (http://www.hplb.gov.hk/wkcd/eng/public_consultation/intro.htm). Adding to this is a litany of ambitious objectives: the WKCD is to “enrich cultural life by attracting internationally acclaimed performances and exhibitions; nurture local arts talent and create more opportunities for arts groups; enhance international cultural

exchange; put Hong Kong on the world arts and culture map; provide state-of-the-art performance venues and museums; offer more choices to arts patrons; encourage creativity; enhance the harbour front; attract overseas visitors; and create jobs” (http://www.hplb.gov.hk/wkcd/eng/public_consultation/intro.htm).

Negotiating meanings

Having outlined the global city ambitions expressed by Shanghai, Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as their cultural policies and actions, particularly in relation to the establishment of cultural icons, this section will examine the relative success of these cities’ strategies.

Shanghai

How successful are Shanghai’s cultural infrastructures in helping to establish it as a global city, and how does this aspiration resonate or contradict with a national consciousness and identity? What do these cultural monuments mean to the average Shanghainese? In the following analysis, I foreground three perspectives to illustrate (1) the tensions between global expectations of cultural liberalism and national practices of control and propaganda that construction of the best cultural infrastructure does not address; (2) how the race for primacy within the national imaginary contributes to and reinforces Shanghai’s efforts in the global pursuit, but also creates tensions about possibly counter-productive, over-reaching efforts that serve neither national goals nor global ambitions; and (3) the divergent meanings and reinterpretations of the iconic cultural buildings for ordinary Shanghainese in their everyday lives, for whom the global ambitions of the city and the quest for national pre-eminence as expressed via these cultural icons neither collude nor collide.

First, the government’s position on culture presents a contradiction between a city aspiring to global status, and one anchored in national Communist Party propaganda. While Shanghai has done well in the construction of cultural monuments, there has not been a concomitant achievement in the production of creative cultural works. A professor with the Shanghai Theatre Academy laments:

For years the city hasn’t had a film which could excite or convince an audience, and the situation is the same with TV dramas. Last year the city won only one prize out of a total of 58 “Five-One project” awards. This is a nationwide project for exemplary works in each of five cultural areas including essays, books, films and TV shows, songs and operas. More and more film stars, TV stars and producers are leaving Shanghai for other areas to find more opportunities (*Shanghai Star*, 2004).

A significant factor explaining this state of affairs is the lack of openness of cultural perspective, and the insistence on using art as propaganda tool for the nation. At the 1996 opening of the Shanghai Museum, Shanghai Party Secretary revealed the government’s continued position that culture is an instrument of the Communist Party, declaring that

During the Ninth Five-Year Plan, Shanghai will build more cultural facilities that will symbolize Shanghai’s image. These cultural facilities will become the base of spreading cultural knowledge and promoting patriotic education (quoted in *Yatsko*, 2001:143).

This approach has resulted in strict government control over cultural life. Ironically, although Beijing is where the central government has more control, most of its cultural

activities are organized by individuals, whereas in Shanghai, many events are planned by the government (Shanghai Star, 2000). Every cultural event, whether local or international, has to be approved by the notoriously conservative Shanghai Culture Bureau (Irish Times, 2000), which some describe as a “leftist throwback” (Napack, 2001:36). The stagnation of Old Shanghai’s vibrancy may certainly be traced to the events of revolutionary Shanghai when art was viewed by the Party as a tool to serve the revolution. As a result, movie studios, broadcasting stations, performing arts troupes and other arts and culture groups were placed under the Party’s control. The most important cultural agencies of China were transferred to Beijing. In Shanghai, bureaucrats were appointed to run the arts institutions. The government further controlled funding for the arts (Yatsko, 2001:139). Today, the effects are still felt. The “leftist throwback” has caused Shanghai’s claims to a cultural renaissance to ring somewhat hollow as cultural development lags behind economic growth. Yet, the freedom to foster creative productions and to boast of not just impressive cultural infrastructure but vibrant cultural life is a necessary condition of a global city. To achieve, this would necessitate loosening cultural controls. In this regard, the Shanghai Grand Theatre is symbolic: it represents what the communist authorities do best, and worst. The infrastructure is state-of-the-art, but artistic expression has not been commensurately supported. In some ways, this chasm is manifested in the economic arena as well, where “Shanghai’s fixation on building the hardware physical infrastructure of an international economic hub” has not been matched by “the necessary software, including a fair and effective legal system, access to accurate information, and market-oriented corporate incentives” (Yatsko, 2001:12).

Shanghai is not oblivious to this irony, and has put in efforts at cultural revival, spurred particularly by a sense of rivalry with Beijing. Here, I would like to pursue a second perspective, and that is, how a desire to gain primary position in the national imaginary, especially in relation to Beijing but also Hong Kong, propels Shanghai in its efforts at cultural revival, which in turn aids its pursuit of global city status. In this, Shanghai leaders show a clear understanding that to be a global hub, it will first (or at least simultaneously) need to achieve “pre-eminence in a national context” (Yusuf & Wu, 2002:1220). However, the double ambition may have its own hindering effects on creativity and cultural “maturity” for the city.

The sense of intra-national competition is strong. For example, Beijing has constructed its own US\$420 million National Theater, designed by French architect Paul Andreu, to match the Shanghai Grand Theater. The Shanghai Grand Theater receives no central government subsidies, whereas some other regional theatres do (Beech, 2000). In general, Beijing also attracts more artists. It is “the centre of China’s film industry”, “the home of the country’s best symphony and ballet”, the leader in “alternative, edgy arts like avant-garde painting, abstract modern dance, underground cinema, experimental theatre, rebellious punk rock, and unconventional performance and installation art” (Yatsko, 2001:152). Indeed, Beijingers believe Shanghai to be fooling itself in seeking to compete, and poses no threat to them (Shanghai Star, 2000).

Nevertheless, Shanghai is taking steps to propel itself forward culturally. Between 1999 and 2000, the content and participants of their arts events displayed a turn towards “internationalization”. The Shanghai International TV Festival, Shanghai International Art Fair and Shanghai International Festival of Arts were ushered in:

The title “international” indicates the scale as well as the content of these events: they will be attended by artists from both home and abroad and with a large investment behind them (Shanghai Star, 2000).

Similarly, the Shanghai Museum is now steadily buying back China's historic treasures from international dealers (*Irish Times*, 2000). More importantly, a greater sense of cultural freedom has also become apparent:

...the Ministry of Culture has taken a relaxed attitude towards exhibitions. Officials have attended each of the 12 shows the Duolun [Museum of Modern Art] has so far hosted [since its opening in December 2003], but they haven't interfered with the art...Early this year, Beijing performance artist He Chengyao executed *Body*, in which he wrapped white duct tape around his naked torso. ...He'd never before been allowed to perform the work in public (SCMP, 15 August 2004).

Despite the advances, some have expressed caution about the scale of recent and planned events. One of the owners of the city's first contemporary Chinese art gallery, ShanghART, expressed the view that "You can't push culture. If culture is allowed to grow, good things will flourish. Force it, and things die" (SCMP, 2002). Like the overheating Chinese economy, Shanghai's cultural burst, if not carefully tended, may have more negative than positive effects on cultural creativity in the long term.

Overall, the Beijing-Shanghai rivalry for national pre-eminence as well as the desire of Shanghai to reach and exceed the international status of Hong Kong has offered significant motivation for Shanghai to develop its cultural capital, which in turn feeds into its global ambitions. In this regard, the desire for national primacy is an important factor in Shanghai's ascendancy as a global city. National and global ambitions coincide, but together press the agenda with such intensity as to prompt words of caution from the artistic community.

I turn now to a third set of meaning negotiations, focusing on the significance and reinterpretations of the iconic cultural buildings to ordinary Shanghainese in their everyday lives, within the context of what the 'nation' and 'global city' mean to them. Several examples drawn from my interviews in the city illustrate how these cultural icons are for the most part removed from quotidian experience, or hold meanings in ways divergent from their original cultural intent. At best, they represent opportunities for making some money. More commonly, they are infrequently remembered symbols of Shanghai's progress, and distant, unfamiliar spaces in the urban imagination. While globalization and development are inescapable facts that confront the Shanghainese, the Shanghai government's efforts to establish primacy in the global urban and national hierarchy through cultural infrastructure and iconic cultural buildings is but a vague, marginal part of quotidian experience.

阿姨 ("Ah yi", literally, "aunty") is a 60-year old woman who works as a part-time domestic help for an expatriate family. For her, the consuming concern is that her sons complete their tertiary education overseas, and her every act is geared towards ensuring that that happens. While reflecting on the rapid changes in Shanghai, cultural infrastructure makes only a fleeting impression. The rapid landscape changes have not escaped her, nor others like her I interviewed, but the impressions that remain indelible are not the new Grand Theatre or the Shanghai Museum. Rather, the demolition of her *dan wei* (单位, work unit) and the rapid construction of new commercial buildings in its place represent for her the city's inexorable globalization. Like her, Chen Jian, a young 20-something driver who runs a private transport service, has most concerns about rapidly rising housing costs, so much so that he feels that house ownership is out of reach for him. Unlike her, Chen is fully aware of many of the cultural infrastructures that have been developed in recent years in Shanghai, particularly those in People's Square. This has everything to do with his shuttling of foreign visitors to these destinations, including particularly, his Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore clientele, and nothing to do with his own

knowledge or use of the museum and theatre, not even having been inside these buildings. In his world, globalization is a double-edged sword. With it has come the stream of foreign visitors who make his transport business viable, but it has also led to escalating costs in Shanghai. Culture, in this context, is irrelevant. So is 'nation', though global flows are very real, and take the form of foreign tourists and business people coming to Shanghai, with its concomitant economic and landscape effects. Two young office workers based in the commercial district of Xujiahui in Puxi whom I interviewed had never been in the Shanghai Museum. Nor had they been to watch anything in the Grand Theatre, where, according to one of them, one needed to dress up formally (by which she meant men in ties), a signifier for her of the prohibitions she felt, and the different world these places represented. An American and Singaporean expatriate couple I interviewed who had lived in Shanghai for 8 years observed the same. They commented on how the smaller scale, more organically developed arts spaces, citing as an example Moganshan Lu, have been overshadowed by the new cultural infrastructures which are fully planned but do not have the deep roots of organically evolved cultures and arts spaces, and do not attract the ordinary Shanghainese. Commenting on audiences in the Grand Theatre, they said:

As far as we can tell, every time we go to the Grand Theater, it is full. But if you look at the people there, 70% are the work groups. They work for the company and they get the tickets. But they don't necessarily relate to this. No way they will pay two, three hundred RMB for these performances...even though Swan Lake and all that is politically correct for this setting. Contrast this to things like the *ping tan* (评弹), which is the traditional story-telling. And you get these teeny tiny theaters, I wouldn't even say theaters, more like rooms. There are two people or three people up there, all day long, and people will come in and out and watch for three to five RMB (personal interview, 31 May 2005).

For many of the Shanghainese I interviewed, questions about what constituted symbols of pride in Shanghai's huge developmental strides in recent years yielded the invariable response of Jin Mao Tower and Oriental Pearl Tower. The race to reach the skies captures the imagination. But only when prompted will they agree that the Shanghai Museum and Shanghai Grand Theatre are also icons in the city. At bottom, the cultural life that the city's authorities seek to offer through the cultural icons is a distant unreality. Walking through the jade gallery of the Shanghai Museum with the two young office workers, there is general disinterest written on Xu Min's face, while Shao Ling exclaims, after some time, pride that early Chinese had the skills to produce jade carvings of the quality evident in the displays. A certain sense of patriotism — of the greatness of the Chinese people — had overcome her. She thanked me for the opportunity to visit the museum, which she confessed she would almost certainly never do otherwise. As we left the museum and walked across to the Grand Theater, for which she and Xu confused with the neighbouring Shanghai Urban Planning and Exhibition Hall, ticket touts appeared to remind us that for some, these cultural infrastructures were less about national pride or global standing, but instead represented opportunities to make some money.

Singapore

Like Shanghai, the intended meanings of Singapore's cultural infrastructures are subject to negotiation and reinterpretation. Focusing on the artistic community's reactions to the Esplanade and public reactions to the demolition of the old National Library and the construction of the new building, I will illustrate how these cultural infrastructures embody the tensions between a state's and a people's global ambitions, national orientations and local attachments.

While acknowledging that global cities have world-class cultural infrastructures, the arts community in Singapore has argued that providing the “hardware” (infrastructure and facilities) without concomitant attention to the “software” (creative development) is regressive for the development of local/indigenous arts. As Kong (2000) has illustrated based on interviews with members of the arts community, the development of large cultural infrastructures attracts large exhibitions and shows (such as the Guggenheim, Tressors, *Cats* and *Les Misérables*), but leaves little room for local communities to develop their own art forms. While a global flavour is apparent, so too is the absence of well-developed indigenous arts. Such a reality, in which Singapore is “a kind of emporium for the arts”, offering yet another retail space (quoted in Kong, 2000:419), they argue, will stymie the blossoming of local styles and the maturing of national identities. Yet, in as much as a global city is not only about hardware, but it is also about showcasing the works of international artists. No global city is worth its salt if it does not have a strong base of indigenous works that express local flavours and national identities.

Why do members of the arts community express such concerns about state initiatives in the construction of cultural infrastructures which ostensibly will serve the arts well and help to place Singapore on the alpha list of global cities? As many recognize, it is because with such heavy financial investment in the Esplanade, there is a need to “go for surefire successes” which will cover the cost of renting the spaces and eventually recovering the investment. Few local groups will be able to afford to use the spaces when “profit-making theatre” will be favoured above “exploratory, indigenous forms”. In a downward spiral, those creative artists willing to explore new forms will feel the pressure to abandon more of those projects and produce more audience-determined plays instead so that they can justify their work.

Apart from the inability to compete on financial grounds, artistically, local groups are still experimenting and finding a distinctively Singapore idiom, and are of the opinion that they will not yet be able to draw the crowds in the same way that foreign acts will. For that reason, many in the arts community have expressed the view that the Esplanade unfortunately pushed back the schedule for developing the small performing spaces in favour of bringing forward the large facilities. A similar argument is pursued in relation to exhibition spaces. Artists believe that the establishment of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in 1995 has meant that few other venues will be developed for exhibitions, on the assumption that there was now a national gallery which promoted and displayed local art. Yet, SAM does not rent its galleries to artists for exhibitions nor can non-SAM staff seek to curate exhibitions since all exhibitions at SAM are curated internally. Any exhibition proposal had to be scrutinised by the curators at a curatorial meeting with regard to the relevance to the museum’s mission and the Singaporean audience before it is recommended to SAM’s Art Acquisition and Exhibition Committee for approval. The protracted and stringent process leaves little room for local artists to grow through small-scale exhibitions. Local artists have been feeling the crunch for exhibition space as retail giants such as Takashimaya have closed down/converted their gallery spaces for other commercial use with the downturn of the economy in the late 1990s. Such pessimism may not have been unfounded in the 1990s. Yet, with Singapore’s growing interest in the “creative economy” and the identification of arts and culture as one key sector in that economy, many more spaces are becoming available through the conversion of existing spaces such as the Old Parliament House into cultural use. They complement the large cultural spaces that are in size and scale deliberately iconic, and which might best be constituted and theorized as a distinct category that embraces the ambition of the city to be global.

Today, the Esplanade has become a distinctive icon for Singaporeans, fondly referred to as the “Durian”, a reference to the sunshade features on its exterior, giving it the look of the

favourite “king of fruits” in Singapore. The vociferous criticisms leveled at its architecture in the early planning stages by members of the public and architectural critics seem to have given way to tacit approval. What were disapprovals about the lack of a distinctive Singaporean identity have become muted, perhaps when the sunshade features were added, and the distinctive local idiom became apparent. Among many ordinary Singaporeans I interviewed, many know it as an iconic presence by the waterfront (not the Esplanade but the “Durian”). Others are familiar with the food outlets associated with its mall. Some attend performances there. While the arts community has been disappointed by the Esplanade’s lack of appropriate space to encourage the development of Singapore arts through the nurturing of local (and ‘national’) expressions, thus frustrating what they believe to be the genuine way to truly achieve global status, public reactions to the icon have become more positive over time. There is often no great depth in the public’s engagement with the space, and often, it is more a part of the national imagination than a space frequently experienced. Yet, its place in the national imagination cannot be belittled for its symbolic significance as a place to be proud of, and a place that represents global competitiveness.

In contrast to the Esplanade, public reactions to the demolition of the old National Library illustrate how big, new cultural infrastructures are not always the means by which the national imagination can be awoken and global aspirations achieved. In 1988 when the first announcement was made that the National Library in Stamford Road would be demolished, there was little public reaction. Nothing happened for a long while. Indeed, some 10 years later in 1997, it was announced that the National Library would be closed for extensive remodeling, with a S\$2.6 million facelift. Yet, barely 1½ years later in 1998, it was announced that the Library would have a new home in Victoria Street, and that a university would be constructed in the heart of the city, including the plot where the existing National Library stood. In anticipation of the high level of human and vehicular traffic, a tunnel would be dug in the area to relieve traffic congestion, and its construction would require the removal of the National Library. Perhaps as an indication of a maturing city and nation, the announcement this time met with widespread public unhappiness. For months, there was an outpouring of emotional attachment to the iconic red-brick building despite the fact that it was modest in scale and deemed to be lacking in architectural merit. Supporters hailed it as a “monument to the belief of the first generation of Singaporeans in our future”, a “touch point and site of common memory and history” which “transcend[s] the religious, ethnic and cultural differences among us”, and a “statement of our belief in the value of education and knowledge and their importance to independent Singapore” (ST, 1998). Many remembered especially the “balustrade”, “porch”, “stairs leading to the library” and the “shack” that served up food nearby, reminiscing fondly about friendships forged, wisdoms earned, and memories accumulated there. Precisely because the world was globalizing rapidly and changes were everywhere palpable, the value of “physical markers” was emphasized, to “anchor our histories”, and “to remember who we are”, as a “people” and a “nation” (ST, 1999). Regretfully, the authorities pressed ahead with its demolition and rebuilding plans.

The case of Singapore illustrates how large cultural infrastructures such as the Esplanade do represent iconic symbols that support global city ambitions, but are neither sufficient nor complete without concomitant development of indigenous arts to support national identities. Indeed, not only do they represent insufficient conditions, the case of the National Library illustrates how they may not even be necessary conditions. The unusually passionate opposition to the demolition of the old National Library which the promise of new world-class premises did not assuage pointed to the search for cultural roots and national identity amidst a rapidly

globalizing world. The episode gives weight to the argument that this is a “time of continuing and even heightening nation-state building processes” (Glick, Basch, & Szanton-Blanc, 1995:59), amounting to a “reassertion” and “celebration of the nation” (Pieterse, 1994).

Hong Kong

By far, Hong Kong’s West Kowloon Cultural District represents the most controversial of the cultural projects discussed in this paper. The WKCD has met with widespread opposition within Hong Kong, which I elaborate below.

One prominent civic group calling itself “Project Hong Kong” and led by film director Tsui Hark, protested against the development of the cultural district, calling for a focus on talent development (for example, establishing a film school) rather than hardware. The local chapter of the International Association of Art Critics called for more discussion and debate as to how the Cultural District would serve as a cultural hub and who the target audience would be (SCMP, 2 June 2004). The “Citizen Envisioning a Harbour” lobby group also expressed concern that community needs were neither solicited nor considered. As a senior member of the group argued: “This is supposed to be a cultural centre for the community – what do private developers know about the cultural needs of a community?” Further, “huge sectors of the community were not included in the planning of this site – people who it is supposed to be there for” (Agence France Presse, 2004). This view is supported by artists and professionals who have expressed concern at the lack of consultation, fearing that the district would be less a cultural hub than a “developers’ colony” (SCMP, 17 June 2004). In particular, the worry is strong that this is really a real estate enterprise that would benefit developers who know and care little about culture and the arts, rather than an important part of the city’s cultural infrastructure that will help develop creativity and the arts. Others question the very need for such a district. For example, Paul Zimmerman, principal of a policy and strategy consultancy, and chief coordinator of Designing Hong Kong Harbour District, questions if such a planned cultural district is necessary since Hong Kong already has a natural cluster. The harbour district, an area between the Eastern Harbour Crossing and Western Harbour Tunnel has 90% of all arts, cultural, entertainment, financial and commercial facilities (SCMP, 29 April 2004). This is corroborated by many first hand accounts from film industry interviewees who argue that in a small place like Hong Kong, the effort to cluster activities in one place made no sense since most places were within easy reach (see Kong, 2005).

In sum, the objections may be summarized as follows. The first centres on opposition to forced clustering, viewed as unnatural and unnecessary. The second is related to the belief that attention should be paid to “software” development (social institutions that support cultural industries) rather than “hardware” development. The third has to do with the process – how the views of the community which the cluster is to support and serve have not been consulted. This objection foregrounds especially the social role of cultural industries, and the need to take into account the community’s needs and aspirations.

Hong Kong’s motivation is largely economic in nature. The WKCD is part of an aggressive cultural economic policy (see Kong et al., 2006) that aims to stimulate the Hong Kong economy that has somewhat lost its luster in the last several years, and to assure Hong Kong’s position as a global city. For Hong Kong, the issue of national identity does not emerge in the discursive space surrounding WKCD. The frame of reference is not the nation, but the city and its global interconnections. This is consistent with the larger ongoing negotiation of Hong Kong identity, in which Fung (2001) argues an insistently local identity rather than a national one intertwined

with the mainland. This, he posits, follows after a period of “re-nationalization” during the political transition of 1997 when Hong Kong reverted to China, but it is a re-nationalization that has quickly “disappeared” (Abbas, 1997). Thus, Hong Kong’s cultural infrastructural projects as represented by WKCD speak little to the project of national identity construction. In fact, economic imperatives and global aspirations underlie Hong Kong’s motivations as a city. In this case, both the nature of public response (protest) to WKCD and the frame of reference for the debate underscore a political culture and identity where the ‘nation’ and ‘national’ are the constitutive outside in the city’s cultural-global strategy. This is consistent with Dego-lyer’s (2001:170) observations that Hong Kong people come across as being “exceptionally outward looking” with an “‘unpatriotic’ internationalistic orientation”, considering themselves “citizens of the world, first; secondarily, citizens of the SAR; and finally, and for many, reluctantly, citizens of the PRC”.

Conclusions

Skyscrapers, urban flagships and megaprojects have hitherto been strategies used by cities to boost their development and global prominence. Increasingly, cultural buildings have also “become important public symbols that instantiate a city’s global status” (Cartier, 1999:186). Indeed, this is the strategy that the governments of Shanghai, Singapore and Hong Kong have adopted. In all three instances, constructing cultural icons is part of their place-oriented strategies to create exciting cities calculated to situate themselves in the global urban hierarchy. However, the similarities end there. I foreground key divergences below, leading to some analytic conclusions.

My first line of analysis is focused on the respective cities’ motivations for cultural monument development. In all cases, global city aspirations are apparent, but in each case, there are differing degrees of significance accorded to local and national ambitions, and differing intersections of local, national and global, reflecting the different geopolitical situations of the three cities.

In Singapore’s case, because it is a city-state, city and national ambitions are congruent. The global city aspiration, anchored in economic imperatives is at least matched by a desire to rally Singaporeans around urban icons, constructing a shared national identity. Global, national and local objectives are in fact one and the same. Hong Kong, on the other hand, as a SAR, looks outward from China, indeed, seeking “escape” from the nation. Its global aspirations are not so much anchored in national goals as they are about economic imperatives, and about manifesting its local identity, distinct from China. The nation as a frame of reference exists only insofar as it is the “other”. Indeed, Hong Kong recognizes that to remain useful to China, it must stay “a step ahead” of China’s development, rather than become “just another Chinese city” (SCMP, 1999). In the case of Shanghai, the city’s motivations are in part anchored in its desire to regain its former glory, and in part in its competition with its rival city, Beijing. Its quest for a distinguished city identity is what propels it, rather than a sense of the national, though its rivalry with the national capital keeps the nation in view. Thus, in all three instances, the city’s cultural-global strategy relates differently to the nation — variously congruent (Singapore), in opposition (Hong Kong), and in competition (Shanghai).

My second axis of analysis is focused on the public response to each city’s cultural-global strategies. I approach this from two related angles. The first is the response to the making of the cultural icons, and the second is the engagement with the completed cultural monuments.

In the making of these places, the political cultures of each city have shaped the ways in which the public has responded. In Shanghai, there can be no public protest. The monuments simply emerged! In Singapore, the structures of democracy offer spaces for public expression, though the one-party government has the wherewithal to simply continue on the path it has set, whether it is the demolition of the old National Library or the construction of what was architecturally deemed a “foreign-aping” Esplanade, missing the opportunity to make a local/national statement of identity. In Hong Kong, where the governance is most democratic, the public outcry over the WKCD in fact stopped the original project and forced a government re-think and the opening of wider channels of consultation and public expression.

In terms of public engagement with these completed cultural monuments, one might ask how successful each of these cities have been? For many ordinary Shanghainese, the new cultural infrastructures constructed at breakneck speeds in the last decade in Shanghai fulfill vague and infrequent roles as a source of urban, leave alone, national pride. For the most part, they are irrelevant and do not feature in the quotidian lives of many. When prompted, they are remembered as symbols of a modern, globalizing city. For some, they mainly represent opportunities to make a quick earning. For the most part, the issues of globalization confronting the everyday lives of Shanghainese are generally removed from issues of cultural pre-eminence, of ‘nation’ or of achieving global city status. They are, instead, grounded in bread-and-butter concerns. At the same time, the state also intrudes into and hinders Shanghai’s global ambitions in its treatment of art as nationalist propaganda so that the cultural vibrancy and ambience expected in a global city still remains to be facilitated in Shanghai. The development of creative indigenous cultural products is stymied by the need to negotiate within a context where culture has been used as national propaganda to protect ideological positions. The nation and its goals are therefore at odds with the city and its global ambitions.

Shanghai’s case is contrasted to the experience of Singapore, which illustrates how cultural icons do capture the national imagination for the ordinary Singaporean either because of familiarity with the place through frequent use, or through imageable architecture that awakens a connection with local culture. What must be noted is that such cultural icons need not necessarily be the new, large infrastructures that governments in the three cities have embarked on in their place-oriented strategies. Indeed, the arts community would argue that these are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the cultivation of a sense of national identity and for the aspiration of global city-ness. Further, they argue, to truly gain global standing, it is imperative to develop Singapore idioms in their art rather than rely on international contributions to a retail art space in Singapore. In this way, the ambitions — and identity — of city and nation are closely intertwined, and link with Singapore’s global reach as well. These interlocking perspectives of city personality, national identity and global ambition are direct consequences of Singapore’s geography as a city-state that has for decades relied on global interconnections for economic survival while engaging in nation-building strategies.

Finally, Hong Kong’s approach to cultural icons, while uncomplicated by national agendas, is burdened instead by its singularly economic focus and the underlying global ambition. To that extent, its West Kowloon Cultural District project has been slowed from the start by multiple civil society voices, variously championing social goals, community participation, and cultural identity. These voices of caution are not unreasonable, reflecting the hitherto absent voices in the planning process, and serve to underscore the multivalent meanings of cultural icons.

Altogether, the lessons to be drawn from Shanghai, Singapore and Hong Kong are that state planners do best to take into account the many potential roles of cultural icons, from fulfilling

economic imperatives to serving as symbols of national identity and pride, to shoring up global city ambitions. To do so requires an understanding that grand infrastructure alone is inadequate for any ambition, city, national or global.

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