

GUEST EDITORIAL Visual arts marketing in East Asia

Yu-Chien Chang

*Graduate Institute of Technology, Innovation and Intellectual Property Management,
National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, and*

Chloe Preece

School of Management, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it reviews the background to, and development of the special issue call for papers on the topic of “Visual arts marketing in East Asia”; second, it introduces the four papers and commentary in the issue; and third, it considers some of the key areas with a rich potential for future directions of research.

Design/methodology/approach – The papers in this special issue comprise of both qualitative (e.g. interviews, observation, case studies) and quantitative (surveys) as well as conceptual issues for policy and artists. Moreover, the articles are interdisciplinary, drawing from art history, cultural studies, philosophy and international relations as well as marketing.

Findings – Findings and insights relate to topics such as the structure of the visual arts markets of East Asia, political influences on these arts markets, alternative spaces such as art festivals, ambiance and audience experience in museums and new media initiatives.

Research limitations/implications – The authors believe that all of the papers have implications for future thinking, research, scholarship and practice in the area of arts marketing, particularly for scholars, cultural institutions and artists working in Asia.

Originality/value – As far as the editors are aware, this is the first ever journal special issue on arts marketing in East Asia. In particular, the authors offer some new ideas in thinking about visual arts marketing in Asia as part of this editorial essay, particularly in considering the difficulties for both artists, arts organisations and academics in creating from the “periphery”.

Keywords Marketing, Arts

Introduction

Welcome to this special issue of *Arts and the Market*, which, in addition to this editorial essay, contains four papers and an additional commentary which were accepted under the call for papers on “arts marketing in Asia”. Although the call for papers was broad in scope, the papers accepted led to a more focussed issue both in terms of genre, all the papers examine the visual arts, and in terms of geography, centring on East Asia. While this was not the result of a conscious editorial steer, one special issue could never encompass the sheer diversity of artistic and cultural approaches across this continent and this focus, therefore, provides an opportunity to delve into further depth in considering the macro- (socio-political) and micro-levels (organisational and individual) of what lies beneath headlines such as “the art market moves East” (Artnet, 2017). We believe that this issue strongly contributes to the development of this nascent market and provides much food for thought in terms of future directions for research. The editorial first provides some background on the special issue; second, we briefly summarise the contents of the issue; and finally, we conclude with some thoughts on the future strategic development of the arts market in Asia.

Past: background for the special issue

In line with a more general interest in Asia’s emerging markets and their increased political power, there have recently been a number of publications examining the rapid growth of the creative and cultural industries in these areas both within academia (see Keane, 2011;



Robertson, 2011; Punathambekar, 2013; Hong, 2014; Lee and Lim, 2014; Velthuis *et al.*, 2015) as well as in the popular press (e.g. BBC, 2015). This work has seen a shift from an emphasis on production and manufacturing to nurturing creativity and the arts in order to capitalise on soft power to become a “cool” nation (see, e.g. the move from “made in China” to “created in China”). Despite the rapid growth of Asian cultural and creative industries over the past decade and their increased reach and popularity globally, little has been written to address how this is transforming the Asian and global cultural landscape. The vast majority of studies about arts marketing privilege the Western system yet research shows that economic, cultural and socio-political differences influence marketing implications and consumer behaviour greatly (e.g. De Mooij, 2014; Soh *et al.*, 2000). While there have been a number of special issues on Asian markets, most of which focus on East Asia as the major growth engine for the world economy for decades to come (e.g. *Marketing Letters*, 2014 on Asian markets and consumers; *Journal of Macromarketing*, 2015 on China; *Sport Marketing Quarterly* on sport marketing in Asia, 2015; *Qualitative Market Research* on Asian consumer culture, 2015; *Journal of Advertising* on advertising in Asia, 2019) there has been little on the arts markets in these nations. Yet as Kolb (2000) demonstrates, marketing arts and cultural products differs from commercial marketing for other organisations and industries. We, therefore, argue that research (with a few exceptions such as Fillis and Lee, 2011 on Korean theatre companies; Lee, 2012 on manga; Takhar *et al.*, 2012 on Bollywood; and Preece, 2014 and Joy and Sherry, 2004 on the contemporary Chinese art market) has not kept pace with the rapid developments in these art markets; there is thus a need to move away from the “Westoxication” (from Robertson, 2011) of these markets to formulate new approaches and perspectives in response to these emerging discourses of the world’s most populous continent.

In considering the visual arts in particular, the focus of this special issue, the significance of the Chinese market cannot be underestimated. Although still an unstable market, China became the second biggest art market in the world in 2017, accounting for 21 per cent of the global art market, largely due to the rise in the number of Chinese US dollar billionaires (Tsui, 2018). Of the three most expensive paintings sold in 2017, two are thought to have been bought by Asians. The rest of East Asia remains a relatively small market for art but the figure is forecast to rise given that the number of billionaires in that region is also increasing rapidly (Pes, 2017). Moreover, Lee and Lim (2014) note that investment in culture in East Asia will further increase in the next decade both in terms of investing in infrastructure and home-grown talent and innovations. In particular so-called “creative clusters”, “creative quarters” and “creative parks” are key to these policies and are expected to bring economic benefits such as regeneration of deprived areas (Lee and Lim, 2014; Gu, 2014). Art fairs and biennials are also popping up across the area (e.g. Gwangju, Taipei, Shanghai, Yinchuan) creating platforms for interaction, where Western “stars” are increasingly forced to share space with the local artists (*Art Newspaper*, 2017). These shifts in the global art market make it an interesting time to examine the art that is being produced in these nations and how it is being marketed and consumed, both at home and globally to understand the significance it is having on the cultural landscape.

Present: overview of the special issue

The lack of research on the arts market in Asia, particularly the visual arts, means that this special issue focusses particularly on conceptualising and reflecting on the structure of these markets, a necessary step before further consideration of individual policies or styles can take place. Moreover, this special issue highlights that we cannot consider Asian art without first recognising the inherent bias of the current contemporary art market and its underlying power structure, as Tagore-Erwin (in this issue) writes “inclusion only implies that non-Western perspectives will be added in to the preexisting Western framework of the globalised, international art market”. In light of this, the editors have been reflexive in the

papers selected for this special issue, giving voice to emerging local scholars as well as more established Western academics and allowing for more diversity in terms of how papers are written by recognising that the privileged Western standard puts scholars in other areas at a disadvantage.

The four papers and one commentary presented here, all reflect a variety of methodological approaches as well as varying perspectives. Most of the papers use a qualitative approach but this ranges from interviews, to observation, to case studies, whereas one paper uses a quantitative approach (surveys). Some papers focus on the macro-structure of the visual arts markets in East Asia, others deal with museums and audience experience. The geographical area covered spans four nations, namely, China, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, uncovering a diverse and contrasting visual arts scene.

In the first paper, Robertson identifies the political underpinnings of four transitional art markets in East Asia, namely, China, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, thus setting the scene for this special issue. Through a fine-grained analysis of these hybrid art markets, Robertson maps the various political structures in place. By providing an ideological understanding of market systems beyond the neoliberal model prevalent in the Western star system, Robertson highlights the indigenous particularities of these markets and some of the resulting misunderstandings of many art market predictions for the East. The paper also demonstrates the blurred boundaries between national arts markets and nation branding strategies and the need for further research into these and the ways in which it affects local artists.

In the second paper, Tagore-Erwin focuses on Japanese contemporary art production, following on from Robertson's examination of Japan's protectionist policies and providing an alternative perspective. Tagore-Erwin considers the influences of globalisation on the Japanese art market in relation to the politics of belonging which have led to an orientalist unilateral Japanese art history focussing on "authentic", i.e., antiquated visions of a primitive and mystical East as seen in traditional methods and mediums. As an alternative, the paper presents more socially engaged public work flourishing in local festivals and highlights the need for multiple narratives rather than a singular imaginary perspective on national art scenes.

Rather than a macro-structural production approach, Hyun considers the consumption of the visual arts in Korean museums. This study demonstrates the importance of ambience and aesthetics, particularly to younger consumers who are seeking hedonic value in their art experiences. In this sense, Korean visitors seem to be representative of the wider public, reflected in global museum trends moving institutions away from passive "white cube" temples for contemplation towards more active spaces of edutainment including "Instagram-ready" exhibitions, pop-up exhibitions and immersive environments encouraging various points of physical and virtual connection between visitors and the museum.

One museum successfully following such a strategy is the National Palace Museum of Taiwan. Wang and Lin provide some cutting-edge examples of the museum's use of new media. The museum is unique in embracing new media and incorporating it into its brand identity, using it to highlight the value of its collection of traditional artefacts, allowing for further engagement, outreach and accessibility. In addition, the NPM is an interesting case in which to consider how digital media can allow a museum to negotiate difficult identity politics and overcome some of the political barriers which may hinder the use of the physical collection.

Finally, Waters provides a brief commentary on the state of the contemporary visual arts marketing in Asia. He reflects on the power of the Western galleries in setting the global agenda, which although economically profitable, is ideologically problematic. The commentary highlights the need for a critical perspective whilst still noting some of the excellent work being done, particularly by nonprofits such as the Asian Arts Archive.

Future: further research and practice

Taken together, the papers and commentary set the scene for a plurality of rich visual arts markets which need to forego simple imitative structures and move beyond reductive binaries of representation that frame the East in opposition to the West. Monica Narula, a Member of Raqs Media Collective, argues that the arts world needs “to be alert and not to succumb to established 20th century binaries” (*Art Newspaper*, 2017). Of course, this is easier said than done and for this to happen government policies to nurture grassroots artistic scenes will be key, with a particular need for investing in the provision of arts education. Similarly, this special issue issues a call for more collaboration between Western and Eastern academics, providing more affordances for a multiplicity of voices which would lead to more inclusive work allowing us to overcome these simplistic binaries. We must first ask ourselves how the global arts market has been shaped and which voices have been excluded, in line with this we note the need for more research, not only on East Asia but also about other arts markets in the “periphery”, e.g., Southeastern countries such as Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam on which even less has been written. Beyond this, there is a need to draw attention to the pervasive euro-, white- and male-centrism of markets generally, including the visual arts market and the embedded logic of colonialism whereby until recently Asian art was considered deficient, particularly in terms of sculptural and human figural representation (Eisen, 2018). A focus on local art forms such as calligraphy and ceramics, for example, could be a way of complementing the dominant discourse which tends to focus on male Art Stars such as Ai Weiwei which have been the focus of much academic and press attention in discussing Asian art (and which one of the editors of this special issue has written about, mea culpa). Taking a historical, critical perspective does not, however, mean dismantling the art market as such but rather situating it and the art within it as “products of their time, evidence of a particular ‘problem space’” (Bonilla, 2017, p. 24) to expose what is missing – the silences and spaces they produce. While this applies to the visual arts market in particular, we argue that this type of approach would be fruitful in looking at other arts forms in Asia including the performing arts, film and music.

Conclusion

This special issue aimed to bring together collaborative efforts from various perspectives. It is timely in that the arts market of East Asia is growing rapidly and requires both new theoretical and practitioner models. It is clear that we have much to learn from the Asian context. While this issue is clearly only a small first step in building up this new field of research, we hope that it will stimulate researchers in the field to further these efforts. Finally, we would like to express our sincere thanks to all the reviewers who provided their generous feedback to each of the manuscripts, to Gretchen Larsen, the journal's former Editor-in-Chief who proposed this topic and made this special issue possible, and to Ben Walmsley and Laurie Meamber for their kind help and support, as well as to the publishing team at Emerald for their ongoing support for scholarly research into important areas of art/market relationships.

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Corresponding author

Yu-Chien Chang can be contacted at: y.chang@nccu.edu.tw