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Cultural Districts in Transition: Navigating Global-Local Tensions in the West Kowloon Cultural District

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Abstract

Cultural districts have become central to urban development, blending cultural production, economic growth, and global city branding. However, tensions between global aspirations and local cultural representation remain underexplored, particularly in East Asian state-led models. Existing studies highlight cultural districts as tools of economic regeneration and soft power, often modelled after Western paradigms like the "Bilbao Effect." While research acknowledges the adaptation of Western models in East Asia, it inadequately addresses how cultural districts negotiate place-specific identity amid globalization. This study fills this gap by examining Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), analyzing how global city-making aspirations are negotiated within the city's unique post-handover political landscape, influencing governance, curatorial strategies, and financial models. Findings reveal that WKCD exemplifies broader contradictions in cultural policy, where state-led governance prioritizes Western-centric artistic standards and market-driven cultural policies, often at the expense of local artistic agency. The district's financial model, heavily reliant on cultural tourism and commercial real estate, reinforces market-driven priorities, creating barriers to accessibility and grassroots participation. This study suggests that rather than a direct transfer of policy models, an adaptive governance framework that considers both economic imperatives and local cultural sustainability provides a more contextually responsive approach. Embedding cultural policy within a dynamic, place-specific context offers a way for WKCD and similar districts to navigate the complexities of global aspirations and local identity while fostering a more inclusive and resilient cultural ecosystem.

Keywords

Cultural districts, policy mobility, state-led market governance, global branding, local cultural identity

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Introduction

Cultural districts have emerged as a key feature of contemporary urban development, blending cultural production, economic growth, and city branding. Defined as spatially concentrated areas of cultural institutions, creative industries, and artistic activities, these districts play a significant role in urban regeneration by attracting investment, fostering tourism, and enhancing local identity (Frost-Kumpf 1998; Chapain and Sagot-Duvauroux 2020). While these developments are often celebrated for their potential to stimulate local economies and create vibrant cultural hubs (Markusen and Gadwa 2010), they also reflect broader market-driven trends that prioritize financial sustainability, global competitiveness, and cultural commodification (Miles and Paddison 2005; Grodach 2017).

The global proliferation of cultural districts can be traced to post-industrial cities in the Global North during the late 20th century, where policymakers sought to revitalize declining urban centers through cultural investments. The "Bilbao Effect," referring to the transformative impact of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, has become a widely cited model for culture-led urban regeneration, inspiring cities worldwide to develop landmark cultural projects (Plaza 2008; Evans 2009b). However, scholars have increasingly critiqued this approach, highlighting its potential to exacerbate social inequalities, accelerate gentrification, and marginalize grassroots artistic communities (De Frantz 2018; Grodach, Foster, and Murdoch 2014).

In recent decades, East Asian cities have actively embraced the cultural district model, adapting it to their unique governance structures and socio-political contexts. Cities such as Seoul, Shanghai, and Taipei have integrated cultural districts into broader economic strategies to enhance global competitiveness and urban revitalization (Wang, Oakes, and Yang 2015; Kong and O'Connor 2009). Unlike their Western counterparts, which often rely on decentralized governance and private-sector investment, East Asian cultural districts are typically state-led initiatives, reflecting strong government intervention in cultural policy and urban planning (Lim and Lee 2018; O'Connor and Gu 2020).

This policy adaptation illustrates the dynamics of policy mobility, where urban cultural strategies are transferred, reinterpreted, and reshaped across different contexts (Peck and Theodore 2010). Rather than directly replicating Western models, East Asian cities have selectively integrated global frameworks with local governance traditions, producing hybrid cultural policies that balance economic imperatives with cultural preservation (Roy and Ong 2011). However, despite these localized adaptations, many East Asian cultural districts face similar tensions as their Western counterparts, particularly regarding the prioritization of international branding over local cultural sustainability.

One of the most ambitious examples of this phenomenon is the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) in Hong Kong. Positioned as a world-class cultural hub, WKCD represents a large-scale state-led effort to enhance Hong Kong's global cultural standing while responding to regional economic and political shifts. Spanning 40 hectares of reclaimed land, the district includes major cultural institutions such as the Xiqu Centre for Chinese opera, the M+ Museum (M+) for visual culture, and the Hong Kong Palace Museum. Since

its establishment, WKCD has been framed as a flagship project aimed at strengthening Hong Kong's role as an international cultural capital, aligning with broader economic and tourism-driven objectives (WKCD Authority 2021). However, as with other cultural districts shaped by policy mobility, WKCD's development has sparked debates about its ability to balance global aspirations with local artistic representation.

Furthermore, WKCD's development has been shaped by the complex socio-political landscape of post-1997 Hong Kong. Cultural policy in the region has shifted from a colonial-era bureaucratic framework, where culture was primarily treated as public recreation, to a strategic alignment with creative industries, global branding, and economic competitiveness (Ho 2018; Leung 2018). In the early stages of the cultural district's planning, a public outcry over the initial development model compelled the government to retract its proposal and initiate broader public consultation (Kong 2007). Nevertheless, as the project progressed to the implementation phase, persistent criticism from the public, particularly from the arts community, continued unabated (Leung 2018; Lim 2018). This transformation reflects the increasing integration of cultural policymaking into governance structures that prioritize market-based outcomes, where artistic institutions are expected to generate revenue, attract tourists, and compete on a global stage (Ho 2017; Leong 2013).

This study examines how WKCD negotiates place-specific identity in the context of globalization. It investigates how global branding strategies, governance models, and curatorial decisions shape the district's cultural positioning and engagement with local artistic communities. By applying theoretical perspectives on cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993) and policy mobility (Peck and Theodore 2010), the research explores the extent to which WKCD reflects a localized cultural identity versus serving as an extension of global artistic networks.

One of the central concerns this research addresses is how WKCD reinforces global artistic hierarchies at the expense of local cultural identity. The district's curatorial strategies, exemplified by M+ Museum's programming, prioritize internationally recognized contemporary art while marginalizing Hong Kong's distinct artistic heritage (Wang, Oakes, and Yang 2015; Kong, Chia-Ho, and Tsu-Lung 2015). This is evident in the acquisition of the Uli Sigg Collection of Chinese contemporary art, which, as critics argue, has overshadowed local artistic narratives (Ho 2014; Foster 2019).

Moreover, WKCD's financial model exemplifies the market-driven contradictions embedded in contemporary cultural districts. As this research demonstrates, its reliance on cultural tourism, luxury retail, and real estate developments reinforces a hierarchy where elite cultural institutions thrive while grassroots artistic practices struggle for visibility and institutional support (Miles and Paddison 2005; Grodach 2017). These tensions between commercial viability and cultural inclusivity raise critical questions about whether cultural districts can truly function as inclusive spaces for artistic expression or if they primarily serve market-driven agendas. Meanwhile, this study argues that while WKCD exhibits global-local tensions common to other cultural districts, its development is uniquely shaped by Hong Kong's post-1997 political reality. This context makes WKCD a critical case for understanding how global cultural models are adapted and contested in a politically

sensitive environment.

The article proceeds as follows: The Literature Review contextualizes the discussion by examining key debates on cultural districts, urban regeneration, and policy diffusion. The Methodology section outlines the qualitative case study approach, including interviews with cultural practitioners and an analysis of policy documents. The Discussion explores two key themes: (1) WKCD's global aspirations and the role of cultural capital in shaping its development, and (2) the commercial contradictions embedded in WKCD's financial model, which prioritizes commercial viability over grassroots artistic inclusion. The Conclusion reflects on the broader implications of WKCD's development, considering how cultural districts can balance global ambitions with local identity formation.

Literature Review

Cultural districts have become key tools for urban regeneration, acting as vibrant spaces where cultural production and economic development intersect. These districts are defined as areas with a high concentration of cultural institutions, creative businesses, and artistic activities. Their primary goal is to revitalize urban areas by strengthening cultural identity, attracting investment, and enhancing city branding (Frost-Kumpf 1998; Chapain and Sagot-Duvauroux 2020). Beyond economic benefits, cultural districts are praised for stimulating local economies, boosting tourism, and creating lively community hubs (Markusen and Gadwa 2010; Evans 2009a).

The concept of cultural districts emerged in the Global North during the post-industrial decline of the 1960s and 1970s, as cities sought innovative ways to address economic stagnation and social disinvestment. For example, London's South Bank and Berlin's Museum Island repurposed cultural infrastructure to attract visitors, generate revenue, and foster urban pride (Evans 2009a; Throsby 2010). The "Bilbao Effect," named after the Guggenheim Museum's transformative impact on the Spanish city, has become a symbol of culture-led regeneration. This phenomenon highlights how cultural districts can reposition struggling cities as global cultural hubs (Plaza 2008).

Several theoretical frameworks help explain the role of cultural districts in urban regeneration and city branding. Florida's (2002; 2019) creative class theory, despite criticism, argues that investing in cultural and creative sectors attracts highly skilled individuals, driving innovation, economic growth, and urban renewal (Comunian 2010; Pratt 2016). Similarly, Landry's (2012) concept of the creative city emphasizes using cultural assets to tackle urban challenges. Meanwhile, the creative industry framework highlights the economic potential of cultural districts as hubs for revenue generation, employment, and cultural production (Throsby 2010; Kong 2014). Together, these frameworks position cultural districts as catalysts for transforming economies and branding cities as dynamic, globally competitive destinations (Hospers 2003).

However, cultural districts have faced significant criticism. Scholars argue that their neoliberal inspiration often prioritizes economic competitiveness over social equity, leading to gentrification and the marginalization of vulnerable communities (Miles and Paddison

2005; Grodach 2017). Additionally, the focus on elite cultural forms and high-profile events risks alienating grassroots practitioners and worsening urban inequalities (De Frantz 2018; Grodach, Foster, and Murdoch 2014).

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, rapid urbanization and economic modernization in East Asia created ideal conditions for adopting and adapting cultural district models. Cities like Seoul, Shanghai, and Taipei looked to Western examples, using culture as a tool for global competitiveness and urban revitalization. Facing pressures to diversify their economies, attract foreign investment, and establish themselves as cultural and economic leaders, these cities embraced cultural districts as a strategic solution (Wang, Oakes, and Yang 2015; Kong and O'Connor 2009).

This adaptation process illustrates the dynamics of policy diffusion, where ideas and frameworks from one context are transferred and reinterpreted in another. As Peck and Theodore (2010) note, policy diffusion is shaped by globalization, economic competition, and urban planning trends, leading to region-specific variations. In East Asia, cultural districts are not simply copies of Western models but result from a dynamic, networked process of policy mobility. Asian cities actively reinterpret and reshape cultural policies, blending global templates with local innovations to create unique, place-specific strategies (Wang, Oakes, and Yang 2015). This reflects what Roy (2011) calls "inter-Asian betweenness," where cities like Hong Kong, Seoul, and Taipei act as hubs of experimentation, drawing on regional and global networks to redefine urban planning and cultural policy. While Western models remain aspirational benchmarks, their adaptation in Asia challenges the idea of one-directional knowledge transfer, highlighting the hybrid and adaptive nature of policy diffusion (Roy and Ong 2011). These dynamics are especially evident in East Asia, where state-led governance plays a central role.

This hybrid and adaptive process highlights how policy mobility works differently across cultural and political contexts. While these dynamics occur globally, East Asian cultural districts show unique regional variations, driven by strong state intervention, the balance between tradition and modernity, and strategic soft power projection.

A defining characteristic of East Asian cultural districts is their state-led governance model, which contrasts with the market-driven, decentralized approaches common in the West. Governments in the region play a central role in planning, funding, and managing cultural districts, aligning them closely with national economic and cultural policies (Kong and O'Connor 2009; O'Connor and Gu 2020). This governance structure reflects broader historical and political traditions, where state intervention has been a key driver of economic development and cultural identity formation. For example, China's cultural districts are closely linked to national strategies for cultural expansion and soft power projection, reinforcing their role as instruments of state-led urban and cultural policy (Lim and Lee 2018).

The state-led approach allows for the development of large-scale cultural infrastructure that would be difficult to achieve under decentralized governance models. With substantial public investment and centralized planning, East Asian governments have facilitated the construction of iconic cultural landmarks designed to attract global attention. Notable

examples include Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts and Shanghai's West Bund Cultural Corridor, both of which serve as high-profile cultural and diplomatic assets. While these projects have successfully enhanced the international standing of their host cities, they often prioritize global prestige over local artistic representation, raising concerns about accessibility and inclusivity (Leng and Chen 2021; Giordano 2017).

While state intervention ensures financial stability and institutional legitimacy, it has also faced criticism for reinforcing exclusivity and limiting grassroots engagement (Kong 2009). The emphasis on top-down decision-making can marginalize independent artists and local creative communities, reducing opportunities for diverse cultural expressions. In response to these concerns, scholars advocate for more participatory governance models that involve local stakeholders—such as artists, cultural practitioners, and residents—in decision-making process (Yeung 2016). This shift aims to make cultural districts more inclusive, socially responsive, and reflective of local cultural dynamics rather than just state-driven priorities.

In response to the limitations of top-down cultural policies, participatory governance has emerged as a complementary approach to state-led models. Participatory governance involves active collaboration between government institutions and local stakeholders, ensuring that cultural districts preserve local cultural authenticity while remaining adaptable to global trends. For instance, Taipei's Treasure Hill Artist Village transformed from an informal settlement into a cultural district through collaboration between government agencies, artists, and residents, preserving historical elements while fostering a creative hub (Rogelja 2021). Similarly, Seoul's Hongdae area has retained its grassroots artistic identity despite commercialization, as local artists and civic groups negotiate with municipal authorities to sustain cultural spaces and community-led events (Shin and Stevens 2013). These cases illustrate how participatory governance can empower local voices while still benefiting from state support.

However, balancing state control with participatory governance remains an ongoing challenge (Yang 2023; Lim and Lee 2018). While community-driven approaches enhance inclusivity and cultural representation, they often struggle with financial constraints and administrative support, making long-term sustainability difficult (Lim and Lee 2018). Conversely, top-down governance ensures efficiency and large-scale development but risks alienating local stakeholders and reinforcing hierarchies of cultural value (Guo and Herrmann-Pillath 2021). The success of participatory governance models ultimately depends on how effectively they are institutionalized within broader governance structures, allowing for meaningful collaboration rather than tokenistic engagement.

Another key strength of state-led governance in East Asia is its capacity to negotiate the balance between tradition and modernity within cultural districts (Kong, Chia-Ho, and Tsu-Lung 2015). Through strategic policymaking, governments leverage cultural districts to both preserve national heritage and promote contemporary artistic innovation, positioning them as symbols of cultural continuity and modernization (Kim 2011; Jung et al. 2015). For instance, South Korea's investment in Bukchon Hanok Village reflects a deliberate effort to integrate heritage conservation with cultural programming, transforming traditional hanok

houses into vibrant cultural hubs that attract both tourists and local communities (Lee 2022). Similarly, Taiwan's Huashan 1914 Creative Park demonstrates how industrial heritage can be repurposed into a thriving creative industry space, blending historical preservation with contemporary artistic expression (Wu, Wall, and Yu 2016). These cases illustrate how state intervention facilitates the coexistence of tradition and innovation, ensuring that cultural districts serve as both guardians of historical identity and incubators of modern cultural production.

Despite these achievements, balancing tradition and modernity presents challenges. Critics argue that the emphasis on global trends and international programming can sometimes dilute local traditions, commodifying them for tourist consumption (Yeung 2016). Furthermore, the financial and operational demands of maintaining this dual focus often strain resources, creating tensions between sustaining heritage and meeting global expectations (Karvelyte 2018). Addressing these challenges requires participatory governance models that involve diverse stakeholders, ensuring cultural districts reflect and amplify local voices while maintaining their global aspirations.

Additionally, in East Asia, cultural districts function as strategic tools for soft power projection, enhancing their cities' global visibility and influence. Governments have leveraged these districts to attract international audiences, promote cultural diplomacy, and showcase their creative and artistic achievements, aligning cultural initiatives with national ambitions (Lim and Lee 2018). Iconic examples include South Korea's Dongdaemun Design Plaza, which hosts international events such as fashion weeks and design exhibitions, symbolizing the country's cultural innovation and global standing (Lee 2015). Similarly, Taiwan's National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts (Weiwuying) exemplifies how global trends and local traditions can coexist, showcasing the region's commitment to cultural excellence and international collaboration (Lu 2019; Goudsmit 2024).

While East Asian cultural districts enhance soft power projection, their emphasis on global prestige often sidelines grassroots authenticity (Cho 2010). Governments prioritize international recognition through large-scale events and elite collaborations, which can marginalize local artists and commodify culture for tourism (Kong, Chia-Ho, and Tsu-Lung 2015; Chou 2012). This hierarchy of cultural value favors global partnerships over homegrown talent, limiting accessibility for independent artists (Yeoh 2005). However, some districts attempt to balance global and local engagement through artist residencies, open-call funding, and community-led initiatives. Taiwan's Weiwuying Center and select programs in Seoul and Taipei integrate local artists alongside international acts (Lu 2019). Yet, such efforts remain inconsistent, as many governments continue to prioritize global branding over cultural inclusivity. A sustainable balance requires policies that equitably support both international aspirations and local artistic ecosystems (Seo 2020).

While extensive scholarship on cultural districts examines governance structures, the intersection of tradition and modernity, and the role of soft power, fewer studies critically assess how these districts negotiate place-specific identity amid globalization (Durrer et al. 2023). Existing research focuses on cultural branding and economic regeneration, emphasizing how cultural districts function as instruments for city competitiveness and

global positioning (Kong, Chia-Ho, and Tsu-Lung 2015; Kawashima 2015). However, how these spaces sustain and articulate local cultural narratives under international pressures remains underexplored.

Studies on state-led governance and participatory models provide insights into cultural district structures but often overlook tensions between global aspirations and local representation. Scholarship tends to highlight gentrification, commercialization, and exclusivity but lacks a comprehensive framework for understanding how cultural districts function as both cultural landmarks and local creative ecosystems.

This study addresses this gap by using the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) as a case study. It explores how global branding, governance models, and local cultural representation intersect, and how WKCD negotiates identity in the face of globalization while maintaining local cultural specificity. This research contributes to discussions on cultural sustainability, urban development, and the evolving role of cultural districts in global contexts.

The guiding research question is: How do cultural districts negotiate place-specific identity in the context of globalization? This question explores how cultural districts mediate local and global forces. The study specifically investigates the strategies employed by WKCD to balance these priorities, and how various stakeholders, including governments, artists, and communities, shape the articulation of place-specific identity.

Understanding the role of place-specific identity in cultural districts has significant implications for urban and cultural policy. As cities increasingly rely on cultural districts to enhance their global standing, it is essential to examine how these spaces reflect and reinforce the identities of their local communities. This inquiry contributes to broader discussions on cultural sustainability, social cohesion, and the politics of representation in urban development.

The West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) is one of the largest cultural infrastructure projects in East Asia, spanning 40 hectares of reclaimed land in Hong Kong. Envisioned as a world-class cultural hub, it houses venues such as the Xiqu Centre for Chinese opera, the Lyric Theatre Complex, and the Hong Kong Palace Museum (HKPM), along with expansive public spaces. The district's development has been phased, with key venues opening progressively: the Xiqu Centre opened in 2019, M+ Museum in 2021, and the Hong Kong Palace Museum in 2022.

Since the 1997 handover, Hong Kong's cultural policy has shifted from a colonial-era bureaucratic framework—where culture was treated as public recreation—toward a more strategic alignment with economic development, global branding, and creative industries discourse (Ho 2018). This transformation has been described as arguably reflecting broader neoliberal governance trends, integrating cultural production into economic policies to enhance global competitiveness and revenue generation (Ho 2017; Leung 2018).

However, these policy shifts have also intensified political tensions and identity negotiations. While the government has sought to position Hong Kong as an international cultural hub, top-down cultural planning has often clashed with grassroots artistic expression, highlighting the complexities of state intervention in cultural identity

formation (Leung 2018; Leong 2013). The increased politicization of cultural spaces further underscores the delicate interplay between cultural policy, governance, and local representation (Karvelyte 2018).

Against this backdrop, WKCD serves as an ideal case study for examining how cultural districts navigate place-specific identity within globalization. As a state-led cultural initiative, WKCD embodies the tension between international aspirations and local identity, making it a valuable site for analyzing cultural policymaking, governance structures, and identity negotiation in Hong Kong's evolving cultural landscape (Lim 2018; 2024; Raco and Gilliam 2012). This study addresses this gap by using WKCD to analyze how these tensions are exacerbated by Hong Kong's unique geopolitical context. We investigate how the district functions as a space where the politics of local identity are negotiated against the backdrop of both Western-led globalization and increasing national integration.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, examining the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) as case study. Primary data include semi-structured interviews with cultural practitioners from artists to arts managers between 2020 to 2021, while secondary sources—policy documents, media reports, and institutional programming materials— contextualize governance strategies and branding narratives. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key patterns in interview data, exploring tensions between global branding and local cultural representation. The study is framed by Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, used here to analyze how WKCD accumulates symbolic capital within the global art field, and policy mobility theories.

The discussion section is structured as follows: the first section explores WKCD's global aspirations, analyzing how architecture, curatorial strategies, and partnerships construct it as a world-class arts hub at the expense of local representation. The second section addresses commercial contradictions, focusing on WKCD's reliance on cultural tourism, commercial development, and financial sustainability, raising concerns about cultural gentrification and exclusivity.

Discussion

Global Aspirations & Cultural Capital

The WKCD was conceived as a landmark cultural project aimed at elevating Hong Kong's international artistic reputation. From the outset, the district's development has been shaped by a desire to secure global legitimacy through architectural spectacle, curatorial strategies, and institutional partnerships. This reflects the broader phenomenon of cultural branding, where cities invest in high-profile cultural infrastructure to position themselves within a global hierarchy of cultural capital (Wang, Oakes, and Yang 2015; Kong, Chia-Ho, and Tsu-Lung 2015). However, the prioritization of international recognition has come at a cost—erasing local cultural narratives and reinforcing Western-centric models of artistic value.

A key strategy in WKCD's pursuit of global recognition has been its investment in iconic architecture. The district follows the "Bilbao Effect," as explicitly stated in official documents, with the authority positioning the WKCD within a development model where cities construct visually striking cultural landmarks to attract tourism, foreign investment, and international media attention (Legislative Council 2006). The M+ Museum, designed by Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron, exemplifies this approach. The museum's bold horizontal structure, with a luminous LED façade towering over Victoria Harbor, was explicitly designed to symbolize Hong Kong's entry into the global art world (Fernández-Galiano 2019; 2016). Similarly, the Xiqu Centre, dedicated to Cantonese opera, was crafted with a striking contemporary aesthetic that blends traditional Chinese motifs with modern design principles (ArchDaily 2019).

However, this emphasis on architectural spectacle raises questions about whose cultural identity is being represented. As Carmona (2006) notes, the original vision for WKCD included a universally recognizable landmark that could project Hong Kong's status as a world-class cultural metropolis. Yet, in doing so, the district's design choices align more closely with global aesthetic trends than with local cultural narratives. While the Xiqu Centre ostensibly celebrates Hong Kong's heritage, its highly stylized, futuristic design feels detached from the grassroots Cantonese opera community it was meant to serve (Sau-yan 2019; Staples 2021).

WKCD's aspiration for global legitimacy extends beyond architecture to institutional partnerships. The district is a member of the Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN) (2016), an international consortium of high-profile cultural hubs, including the Southbank Centre in London and the Lincoln Center in New York. Participation in such networks enables WKCD to exchange best practices with leading Western institutions while aligning with globalized cultural governance frameworks that emphasize financial sustainability and international recognition. Moreover, WKCD's partnerships with institutions like Tate Modern and MoMA further align it with international artistic networks. The M+ Matters lecture series, for instance, has featured curators from these institutions discussing topics like "Building a Global Museum in Asia," framing M+ as part of an elite transnational discourse (M+ Museum 2017; 2018; 2019). However, this strategy also reproduces Western-centric definitions of artistic value, reinforcing the dominance of Euro-American institutions in shaping the standards of artistic excellence.

Beyond the institutional partnerships, WKCD's pursuit of international artistic prestige is evident in the programming and curatorial choices of the M+ Museum. While M+ brands itself as "Asia's first global museum of contemporary visual culture (WKCD Authority 2021a)," its collection is largely dominated by mainland Chinese and Western contemporary art, with relatively limited representation of Hong Kong's own visual culture. One of the most controversial acquisitions is the Uli Sigg Collection, a vast assemblage of contemporary Chinese art that includes works from politically controversial (Wang 2021; Foster 2019). While this collection enhances M+'s global profile—allowing it to compete with institutions like the Tate Modern and MoMA—it raises critical questions about Hong Kong's artistic representation. Critics argue that the museum's reliance on mainland

Chinese art sidelines Hong Kong's distinct artistic traditions. For instance, Ho (2014) notes that compared with the pop culture of Hong Kong, Chinese contemporary art is a form of exported art that has little impact on the development of Hong Kong art. This frustration is not merely about artistic representation but is tied to broader anxieties about the erosion of Hong Kong's distinct cultural identity in the post-handover era, reflecting the public contestation over cultural megaprojects noted by scholars. Foster (2019) also argues that a considerable amount of contemporary Chinese artworks were being produced specifically for Western buyers' taste when Sigg started purchasing works in the 1990s.

This global aspiration has also resulted in significant exclusions and contradictions. By prioritizing Western validation and international prestige, WKCD has often sidelined local artistic voices and cultural expressions. Many Hong Kong artists have expressed frustration that the district's funding, exhibition spaces, and curatorial decisions favor global contemporary art trends over local artistic traditions. One artist highlighted the imbalance of power in Hong Kong's arts ecology, noting that elite culture dominates the scene, leaving non-elite local artists on the margins. He commented that:

> *I find if M+ 's mission is to promote the elite, then they no need to communicate with locals. (What do you mean by "elite" ?) Elite means the most professional and small groups. There is a dilemma in balancing elite and grassroots. If they are aiming at the engaging community, they should clarify their position. There are a lot of effects that are needed to build a relationship with local practitioners* (Interviewe 25).

The marginalization of Hong Kong's visual culture is further reflected in M+ Museum's shifting mission statements. Early government reports emphasized that M+ would foreground Hong Kong perspectives, ensuring the city's unique artistic traditions—spanning film, graphic design, and architecture—were central to its collections (Home Affairs Bureau 2007; Report of the Museums Advisory Group 2006). However, more recent policy documents have adopted broader, more ambiguous language, positioning M+ as a hub for "Asian and global visual culture" rather than explicitly prioritizing Hong Kong's artistic contributions (WKCD Authority 2021b). The Acquisition Policy (Legislative Council 2021b) further justifies this shift, arguing that elements of popular culture are already integrated into its existing collection areas—Design and Architecture, Moving Image, and Visual Art—and that institutions such as the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and Hong Kong Film Archive maintain substantial collections in this domain. Consequently, M+ prioritizes collaboration over active collection and preservation of Hong Kong's popular culture. This departure from the Museums Advisory Group's initial vision, which underscored the significance of Hong Kong's visual heritage, reflects a broader dilution of its original mission and raises concerns about the absorption of Hong Kong's local art scene into a larger, China-centric framework.

Conversely, the museum's former executive director Lars Nittve defended the purchase to the press, stating that the acquisitions policy offers a Hong Kong perspective with a global vision, even admitting that contemporary art or visual culture is a Western idea (Chow 2013). Furthermore, at a Legislative meeting in 2015, when confronted by a legislator

who questioned the low number of Hong Kong works[1] in the museum's collection, which would undermine the achievement of M+'s positioning as a museum of visual culture for Hong Kong people, the Authority responded that:

> *Unlike other local museums which focused mainly on telling the story of Hong Kong, M+'s vision was to build a world-class collection representative of the 20th and 21st century visual culture from a Hong Kong perspective with a global vision. While an appropriate balance should be struck between the representation of Hong Kong art and non-Hong Kong art in the M+ Collection, it might not be suitable to measure the level of representation or importance of Hong Kong art in the M+ Collection in terms of the number of such works acquired* (Legislative Council 2015, 7).

This marginalization of local art is not accidental; rather, it is a direct and intended consequence of the museum's foundational mission. Our critique, therefore, is not that M+ has failed its mission, but that the mission itself, by prioritizing the accumulation of global symbolic capital , creates an institutional hierarchy that risks overshadowing and devaluing Hong Kong's own distinct artistic heritage and grassroots communities. As Bourdieu (1993) argues, symbolic capital in the art world is distributed unequally, with certain artistic movements gaining global prestige while others remain peripheral. In aligning with internationally recognized collections, M+ positions itself within a Western-dominated cultural hierarchy, privileging works that already hold significant symbolic capital in elite art circles. This strategy enhances Hong Kong's global visibility but does so at the expense of nurturing a locally rooted, autonomous cultural identity.

A similar pattern can be observed in the district's performing arts programming. The Xiqu Centre hosts a diverse range of Chinese opera genres while also positioning Cantonese opera on an international platform. However, local troupes face challenges in securing performance opportunities, raising concerns about the balance between promoting regional artistic traditions and fostering broader cultural exchange within WKCD's curatorial approach (i-Cable 2022; Cheung 2018).

Commercial Contradictions

In addition to global artistic validation, WKCD exemplifies a market-driven cultural district where artistic and cultural development is deeply intertwined with economic imperatives such as tourism promotion, property development, and global branding. While the district aims to foster artistic experimentation and public engagement, its revenue-driven strategies often produce tensions between financial sustainability and local cultural inclusivity. The following sections explore how WKCD's market-oriented approach shapes its economic strategy, financial challenges, and impacts on cultural accessibility.

WKCD's business model is heavily reliant on cultural tourism, positioning the district as

1 According to the M+ Review 2023, works by Hong Kong artists and makers constitute 23% of the M+ Collection and the M+ Sigg Collection, while archival material by Hong Kong artists and makers accounts for 27% of the M+ Collection Archives. (M+ Review 2023, 40).

a destination for high-spending international visitors. Revenue streams include ticket sales, luxury retail, fine dining, and cultural merchandise (WKCD Authority n.d). This approach aligns with Hong Kong's broader economic strategy to enhance its global cultural profile and stimulate tourism-related economic growth.

Despite facing a fiscal deficit, WKCD reported better-than-expected financial performance during the 2020–21 fiscal year. According to the Legislative Council, a 19% increase in operating income (equivalent to HK$64 million) and reduced operating expenses significantly narrowed the operating deficit before depreciation and interest expenses to HK$491 million, marking a 50% reduction from the projected HK$987 million (Legislative Council 2021c, 3). This improvement reflected WKCD's ability to leverage commercial assets to offset financial challenges.

The WKCD Authority remains optimistic about the district's capacity to generate long-term rental income, positioning its commercial developments as integral to the district's financial sustainability. The Authority stated:

> *The cultural capital of the global institutions in the District will elevate the harbourfront precinct into an international brand, giving its commercial developments unique exposure. The Authority will adopt a market-driven approach to unleash the value of its commercial land for Retail, Dining and Entertainment (RDE) as well as Hotel/Office/ Residential (HOR) developments, through partnership with developers by the Build, Operate and Transfer (BOT) model, with a view to creating a unique art-themed commercial destination and generating long-term sustainable income to support the cultural mission of the District* (Legislative Council 2021c, 4).

This strategy reflects WKCD's commitment to a market-driven development model that integrates cultural capital with commercial ventures.

In addition to local and international visitors, WKCD has prioritized the mainland Chinese market as a key revenue source. During a Legislative Council meeting, the Authority announced plans to develop a dedicated e-commerce platform to target mainland consumers, enabling them to purchase tickets and WKCD-branded cultural merchandise online. WKCD also explored partnerships with major mainland e-commerce platforms to promote its programs and activities (Legislative Council 2021a). This strategy not only aims to expand revenue streams but also aligns with Hong Kong's broader integration into the Greater Bay Area cultural and economic framework.

Despite initial optimism, recent financial reports indicate that WKCD faces escalating economic challenges. By March 2023, WKCD's net cash reserves had declined to HK$6.5 billion, with projections indicating that funds would be fully depleted by March 2025 (WKCD Authority 2023). The district reported a recurring operational deficit of HK$1 billion, alongside a 20% drop in ticket sales and museum retail revenue due to declining visitor numbers. WKCD CEO Betty Fung stated that the district remains reliant on borrowing and anticipates requiring a HK$5 billion bank loan over the next three years to sustain operations (Ma 2025). She also noted that local consumer spending remains weak, and while mainland and regional tourism are gradually recovering, long-haul international

visitors remain scarce, further straining revenue streams (Ma 2025).

In response to mounting financial challenges, the Chief Executive in Council approved the relaxation of the Enhanced Financial Arrangement (EFA) for WKCD on 16 July 2024 (WKCD Authority 2024). This policy adjustment allows WKCDA to sell residential units in Zone 2 of the district, lifting the previous restriction that mandated the use of the "Build-Operate-Transfer" (BOT) model. Additionally, WKCDA is permitted to retain all proceeds from tenders awarded to private developers for these residential projects. This relaxation is subject to a maximum total residential gross floor area of 170,280 square meters, as stipulated in the West Kowloon Cultural District Development Plan.

The EFA relaxation aims to provide WKCDA with a more stable and diversified income source while enhancing financial flexibility. By enabling direct residential sales and optimizing land use for commercial development, the policy is expected to generate long-term revenue without increasing the government's financial burden. This move marks a shift towards a more market-oriented development model, aligning with WKCD's broader market-driven approach to cultural district management.

The cases of M+ and Xiqu Centre exemplify the tensions inherent in WKCD's market-driven approach, where the pursuit of financial sustainability through high pricing and commercial programming undermines public accessibility and local artistic participation. The M+ Museum, for example, initially offered free admission to local residents. However, after its first year of operation, M+ introduced an admission fee of HK$120 for general entry, along with a tiered membership structure, including an M+ Member fee of HK$600 and an M+ Patron fee of HK$30,000[2]. This pricing structure places M+ among the most expensive museums in the region, comparable to institutions in New York and London. While such fees contribute to the museum's financial sustainability, they also create barriers for low-income residents, reinforcing the perception that WKCD is designed for the elite rather than the general public.

Similarly, Xiqu Centre, the other iconic facility, is also looking for tourist income resources. While the centre conducts several free public programs, such as guided tours and free concerts, the Tea House Theatre, located on the first floor of Xiqu Centre, is a venue dedicated to performing small-scale regional Xiqu or traditional music, acted and narrated in Cantonese with Chinese and English subtitles. It offers performances from Friday to Sunday every week and serves tea and dim sum during the show with standard charge pricing ranging from HK$342 to HK$300 (WestK. n.d.). Although one interviewee commended the trilingual format for effectively engaging non-Chinese and Cantonese audiences, it is apparent that these quick and repetitive performances are primarily aimed at attracting tourists. However, the venue's high rental fees, restrictive booking policies, and preference for large-scale productions have excluded many local opera troupes, reinforcing a divide between elite state-sponsored opera and grassroots Cantonese opera practitioners (i-Cable 2022).

2 Website: https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/membership/.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the tensions at the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) are not merely a byproduct of its development but a direct result of its core institutional strategy. The district's state-led governance model is fundamentally geared towards accumulating global cultural capital through iconic architecture, elite institutional partnerships, and market-driven financial imperatives. As this study's analysis of WKCD's curatorial and financial decisions has shown, this top-down pursuit of international prestige has transformed the district into a contested space, where the goal of global branding often conflicts with the need for authentic local representation and inclusive public access.

The findings suggest that the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) embodies the broader tensions between global ambitions and local cultural identity. On one hand, the district seeks to establish global prestige through iconic architecture, international institutional partnerships, and high-profile art acquisitions, positioning itself within a competitive transnational arts landscape. This aligns with global trends where cultural districts function as instruments of soft power and economic growth, reinforcing city branding and cultural tourism (Wang, Oakes, and Yang 2015). However, these global aspirations often come at the expense of local artistic representation. The evolving mission statements of M+ Museum and curatorial decisions illustrate how Hong Kong's unique cultural identity is increasingly framed within broader Asian and international narratives, diluting its original commitment to local artistic heritage. As Leung (2018) argues, while WKCD represents Hong Kong's cultural ambitions, its long-term success as a cultural hub depends on sustained engagement with local artists and communities rather than mere participation in the globalized arts economy. Without this local support, the district risks public alienation, which in turn could erode political will for its continued public funding, threatening its operational sustainability in the long run.

From a governance perspective, WKCD follows the state-led cultural policies characteristic of East Asian cultural districts, where bureaucratic and hierarchical decision-making dominates. This model promotes Western-centric standards of artistic excellence and advances market-driven cultural policies, often undermining local artistic ecosystems. While this approach enables large-scale infrastructure development and financial stability, it also reinforces top-down decision-making that limits grassroots participation. This study highlights how state-led governance can contribute to global recognition while restricting local agency in defining cultural narratives. This reflects Liu (2016)'s cultural ecology approach, which argues for a governance model that balances economic imperatives with social, artistic, and humanistic values. WKCD's trajectory demonstrates the limitations of a rigid, market-driven framework, supporting Liu's argument that cultural districts should operate as dynamic ecosystems rather than commodified cultural assets. The financial challenges of WKCD further illustrate the contradictions of a market-driven cultural district, where reliance on tourism, commercial development, and high-priced exhibitions creates barriers to accessibility and local artistic engagement. This aligns with concerns

raised by Durrer et al. (2023), who emphasize that cultural policy must be understood as situated practice, shaped by specific political and social conditions rather than applied as a standardized global model.

To prevent cultural districts from becoming mere instruments of global branding, cultural policies must move beyond simple policy transfer and adopt more adaptive models based on policy mobility and assemblage theory. Western cultural policy models have been widely adopted in East Asia, but they often fail to account for the region's complex social structures and cultural identities. To address this, policymakers should view cities as nodes of cultural exchange, circulation, and adaptation, rather than applying a fixed Western template (Pratt 2009). Instead of following a globalized, one-size-fits-all approach, East Asian cities should engage in inter-referencing to develop policies that reflect local cultural heritage, traditions, and socio-political contexts, ensuring that cultural policy strengthens social cohesion and reduces cultural inequalities (Wang, Oakes, and Yang 2015). In practice, applying a participatory model to WKCD could involve several actions. Drawing from Taipei's Treasure Hill Artist Village, the Authority could establish a formal advisory board for public programming that includes local artists and community representatives (Ng 2015). Furthermore, inspired by community-led negotiations in Seoul's districts, a percentage of the revenue from WKCD's commercial real estate could be allocated to a transparent, open-call fund to support grassroots artistic projects within the district, ensuring that commercial success directly fosters local cultural sustainability (Kim 2011).

WKCD serves as a key case study demonstrating how cultural policy can act as an intermediary in regulating cultural ecosystems, especially in contexts where local cultural production is vulnerable to globalization and external pressures. In environments where local cultural institutions remain underdeveloped or underfunded, cultural districts often prioritize global branding and elite cultural consumption over genuine support for local artistic communities. To address this, policymakers must not only support individual artists but also build a broader cultural ecosystem by engaging with local communities and tailoring policies to specific local needs. As Wang et al. (2015) note, many cultural districts in East Asia serve as tools for global city-making rather than fostering local cultural production. WKCD's development further highlights the need to embed cultural identity into large-scale cultural projects and ensure that cultural policies function not only as mechanisms for global connectivity but also as tools for local cultural empowerment.

If cultural policy is redefined as a dynamic and locally embedded practice rather than a standardized model, East Asian cities can develop more sustainable and inclusive cultural districts, balancing global ambitions with local cultural preservation. This study emphasizes that cultural policy should not be viewed solely as a tool for economic growth and city branding, but as a critical framework for empowering local cultural communities, fostering social inclusion, and supporting diverse artistic expressions.

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