Cultural capital schemes in Asia: mirroring Europe or carving out their own concepts?[1]

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ABSTRACT

Despite bearing similar names and sharing certain aims, the implementation of the *cultural city/capital* initiative in Europe and in the subregions of Southeast and Northeast Asia has been substantially dissimilar. In Europe, the annual *European Capital of Culture* (ECoC) status commonly constitutes an opportunity to showcase the best of the arts and culture of the host city, and counts on the support of sizable public funding. In Southeast Asia, the initiative scarcely receives any public or regional funds and the understanding of what the designation means varies widely from country to country. In Northeast Asia, regional diplomacy is one of the main motivations for initiating the scheme. This paper seeks to examine the *cultural capital* patterns chosen in these Asian subregions in comparison with their European counterpart, as well as their motivations and reasons to exist. Ultimately, the paper investigates how much ASEAN and Northeast Asia are simply trying to replicate the European model, carve their own concepts, or create hybrid schemes.

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, the term "Asia" specifically refers to Northeast and Southeast Asia, the only two Asian subregions that have sustained cultural capital/city initiatives for a continuous number of years. Other schemes such as the Capitals of Islamic Culture and the Arab Capital of Culture have at times nominated cities in the wider Asian region, but always in alternation and/or in conjunction with cities from other regions such as Africa and the Middle East.

Introduction

In Europe, the concept of designating an annual *European Capital of Culture* (ECoC) was first formulated in the mid-1980s (in the framework of an initiative originally named *European City of Culture*). It was Melina Mercouri, then Greek Minister of Culture, who proposed the scheme, and in 1985 Athens became the first of over 50 cities to be in the European cultural limelight for the period of a year. The aim of the initiative was to bring Europeans closer together by highlighting the richness and diversity of European cultures, and raising awareness of their common history and values. Over the years the scheme consolidated and soon developed complex administrative procedures; cities are able to access considerable sources of European, regional and national funding, and there is keen competition among cities to become an ECoC.

Holcombe underscores that geographical regions "can be defined in many ways, and a variety of labels applied to them to suit different purposes" (Holcombe, 2011: 3). It is therefore significant to note that in the case of Asia, terms such as "Southeast Asia" or "East Asia" are not static and change according to contexts[2]. The concept of "East Asia" used throughout this paper has been discussed in international relations, not without controversy. It can refer to several geographical realities, whether it is used from a historical, economic, political or geostrategic perspective. As such, Sikri maintains that the term East Asia "is not so much a geographical definition as a concept; [but rather] a politico-strategic construct" (Sikri, 2010), while Yeo depicts it as still "amorphous" (Yeo, 2008). Jones and Smith emphasise the widespread inconsistency in delimiting East Asia's boundaries when they affirm that its definition "presents acute definitional problems (…) [and] what constitutes East Asia remains imprecise" (Jones & Smith, 2007: 175). For the purpose of this paper, "East Asia" is used throughout it to refer specifically to China, South Korea and Japan in Northeast Asia, and to the 10 Southeast Asian member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)[3]. Together, these 13 Asian countries form the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) alliance, a key geostrategic process of multilateral cooperation in the region that acts in political, security, economic and socio-cultural areas. The APT process has aroused great interest over the last two decades: it is perceived by numerous analysts as stable, and a catalyst for other key alliances and collaborative processes in the Asian region (Stubbs, 2002; Zhang, 2006; Wanadi, 2004; Kim, 2004)[4].

In East Asia, the cultural capital/city phenomenon is much more recent than in Europe. Several cities in the Philippines were labelled first *ASEAN City of Culture* for Southeast Asia for the biennium 2010-2011. Among the scheme's main objectives were the strengthening of regional identity, raising ASEAN's profile, and promoting the growth of the region's creative industries. Subsequently, Singapore, the Vietnamese city of Huê, and Brunei's capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, were designated *ASEAN Cities of Culture*. In Northeast Asia, Yokohama in Japan, Gwangju in South Korea and Quanzhou in China were the first nominated *East Asian Cities of Culture* in 2014. In the succeeding years, another nine cities in Northeast Asia received that distinction[5].

The following pages seek to shed light on the recent *cultural capital/city* schemes currently being forged in the East Asia region, as well as on the motivations for these countries to develop them now. While the author is conscious of the profound differences of the three geopolitical contexts, and of the discrepancies in their understanding of cultural cooperation[6], the paper also aspires to establish a comparison between the three schemes. In particular, it aims to investigate to what extent ASEAN Plus Three countries are simply trying to replicate the consolidated and established European model, carve their own concepts, or create hybrid schemes.

Capitals of culture: a very European concept

The notion of a temporary regional cultural capital has its origin in the mid-1980s when Melina Mercouri, Greece's then Minister of Culture, developed the concept of designating an annual *European City of Culture.* Europe, via its then Council of Ministers of the European Community, launched the first European City of Culture programme in 1985 in Athens, renamed *European Capital of Culture* (ECoC) in 1999 (European Communities, 1985). The initiative is designed to bring Europeans closer together by highlighting the richness and diversity of European cultures, celebrating the cultural features Europeans share, increasing European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area, and fostering the contribution of culture

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2 In *Orientalism*, Said warned that the concept of "Asia" is not constituted by physical realities but by the image and the perception of the same developed by the Western society (Said, 1978). The concept of "Southeast Asia", so commonly accepted in international relations today, emerged solely as a result of the World War II (Huxley, 1996); and Weatherbee describes it as "an aggregation of overlapping geographic, ethnic, cultural, political, and economic subregions" (Weatherbee, 2015: 16). The term only became popular after the creation in 1943 of the British Army's South East Asia Command (SEAC).

3 As of 2017, ASEAN has a membership of 10 countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

4 For more information on the ATP process, see ASEAN (2017).

5 These cities are: in 2015, Niigata (Japan), Cheongju (South Korea), and Qingdao (China); in 2016, Nara-ken (Japan), Jeju (South Korea), and Ningbo (China); and in 2017, Kyoto (Japan), Daegu (South Korea), and Changsha (China).

6 For more on this disambiguation, see Ocón (2015).

to the development of cities. Initially conceived under a-year-a-city scheme, since 2001 the designation is given to two cities a year, with a rotation of countries to ensure fairness (European Commission, 2016a). To date, 56 cities in Europe have at some point been designated ECoC. For the year 2017, Aarhus (Denmark) and Paphos (Cyprus) hold the designation, and cities in six countries (Netherlands and Malta 2018; Italy and Bulgaria 2019; Croatia and Ireland 2020) have already been appointed ECoC until the year 2020.

Although outcomes vary depending on the city implementing the scheme, in general, the ECoC is considered a successful initiative and several reports have demonstrated its overall positive impact on the appointed cities[7]. Also, according to the European Commission, the ECoC can be a good opportunity to: regenerate cities (in Kosice 2013, private sector and local universities worked together to transform its industrial past into a creative and cultural hub for the Carpathian Region); create economic growth (in Lille 2004, each euro of public money invested generated 8 euros for the local economy); boost tourism (Pécs 2010 experienced a 27% increase in overnight hotel stays); build a sense of community (Liverpool 2008 had nearly 10,000 registered volunteers and all schoolchildren in the city participated in at least one activity during the year); enhance the image of cities in the eyes of their own inhabitants (in 2009 neighbourhoods across Linz set up their own cultural events, generating works in such unusual venues as shop windows and tunnels under the city); breathe new life into a city's culture (Mons 2005 inaugurated 5 new museums, 2 new concert halls and 1 conference centre), and raise the international profile of cities (Stavanger 2010 established cultural collaborations, co-productions and exchanges with more than 50 countries) (European Commission, 2016b).

Despite this overall positive outlook for the ECoC, the efficiency of the scheme and its ability to fulfil its aims has also been questioned at times. For instance in 2004, a report on *European Cities and Capitals of Culture*, prepared for the European Commission by Palmer/Rae Associates, raised questions about the economic benefits and long-term impact of the Capital of Culture/City of Culture concept (Palmer/Rae Associates, 2004). In the report, the authors affirmed that "in many cities there was a sense that the full potential of the event had not been realized (...) [and] the huge levels of investment and activity they generated rarely seem to have been matched by long-term development in the city" (Palmer/Rae Associates, 2004: 146).

A lot has been written about the ECoC initiative in the last few years: periodic reports analysing the scheme, several monographic publications, books exclusively dedicated to the topic[8], and evaluation reports on the designated cities published annually by the European Commission. There is no shortage of information, data and reviews on the European scheme, and indeed it is not the purpose of this paper to elaborate further on those analyses. Rather, below are some of its main features in order to allow a basic comparison with its Asian counterparts:

· *Bidding for ECoC status*: This occurs first at the national level in the form of bids, and the final selection is done by an international panel of experts in the cultural field. For instance, in the 2016 Spanish candidacy, up to 16 cities presented a first bid; they were reduced to a shortlist of six, before the panel ultimately chose Donostia-San Sebastián.

· *Forward planning*: European countries know well in advance when their turn comes to launch their first bid for their cities to become ECoC. Indeed, since a Council resolution passed in 2014, European countries know now the allocation of future ECoC countries all the way up to the year 2033 (European Union, 2014). Six years before the title-year, the host member state publishes a call for applications and cities can submit a proposal for consideration; designated cities receive the final confirmation at least four years in advance in order to allow them ample time to prepare (European Commission, 2016a).

· *Substantial financial support from institutions*: Each designated city has the opportunity to receive 1.5 million euros from European funds via the Melina Mercouri Prize, provided that it fulfils a set of conditions[9]. Cities usually receive significant national and regional funding too (e.g. for Galway 2020, the Irish government has earmarked 15 million euros on top of the European funds) (Tipton, 2016).

· *Supervision and monitoring*: Designated cities need to align as much as possible with the vision, objectives, strategy programme and budget as proposed during the bid. The independence of the artistic team must be appropriately respected as well, and the European dimension of the programme needs to remain prominent. Monitoring tools and arrangements for evaluations need to be put in place by the selected cities and they need to provide a report. Failure to do this can put the release of some of the funds in jeopardy.

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7 For instance, the 1994 report *European Cities of Culture and Cultural Months* commissioned by the Network of Cultural Cities of Europe concluded that the scheme has "produced an energetic and imaginative response which reinforces the role of the cities as cultural entities". In the 2004 report *European Cities and Capitals of Culture*, prepared for the European Commission by Palmer/Rae Associates, it was noted that the vast majority of ECoC organizers considered that the event had been mostly beneficial to their cities.
8 See, for instance, Patel (2013).
9 For more on the Melina Mercouri Prize, see European Commission (2014: 17).

"DESPITE ITS RELATIVE NEWNESS, IN THE LAST SEVEN YEARS OVER 20 CITIES HAVE ALREADY BEEN DESIGNATED *CAPITAL/CITY OF CULTURE* IN THE ASIAN REGION, AND OTHERS ARE IN THE PIPELINE FOR FUTURE NOMINATIONS"

• *Decentralisation and potential for socio-economic development and cultural transformation*: During its first 15 years of existence the scheme focused on big and established cities with existing cultural infrastructure and heritage worth celebrating, often capital cities, such as Berlin (1988), Paris (1989), Dublin (1991), Madrid (1992), Lisbon (1994), and Copenhagen (1996). With the turn of the millennium, however, the focus turned towards less prominent cities for which the ECoC title has the potential to boost their cultural, social and economic development. Through culture and art, these cities can raise their international profile, improve quality of life, strengthen their sense of community, create economic growth, boost tourism, and initiate regeneration, among other positive outcomes. Being an ECoC can bring "fresh life to these cities" putting them "at the heart of cultural life across Europe" (European Commission, 2016b).

Diversity of international approaches

After the initial boost provided by the European initiative, some other regions, subregions and even countries took on the idea and started organizing their own *capital/city of culture* schemes, drawing some inspiration from the European one. In this way, the *Arab Capital of Culture* is an initiative started by the Arab League under the UNESCO Cultural Capitals Program to promote and celebrate Arab culture and encourage cooperation in the Arab region. Since the initiative was set up in 1996, when Cairo was designated the first Arab Capital of Culture, 22 cities have been selected Arab Capital of Culture. Luxor, in Egypt, is the city nominated for the title in 2017. The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), based in Rabat (Morocco), has appointed *Capitals of Islamic Culture* since 2005. To date, 34 cities in Africa, the Middle East and Asia have been awarded the title. In the year 2017, Amman (Jordan), Mashhad (Iran), and Kampala (Uganda) received the distinction (ISESCO, 2017).

For the Latin American region, at least two non-governmental organizations propose cultural capitals. The *Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas* (UCCI), based in Madrid (Spain), has nominated cultural capitals in Ibero-America since 1991, when Bogotá (Colombia), was granted the title (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2015). *The American Capital of Culture*, launched in 1998 by the International Bureau of Cultural Capitals (IBOCC), is recognized by the Organization of American States (OAS), and annually selects a city in the Americas since the year 2000 to serve as the *American Capital of Culture* for a period of one year. Mérida in Mexico is the city nominated for 2017 (Capital Americana de la Cultura, 2016).

In Brazil, the initiative *Capital Brasileira da Cultura* (CBC) was created to promote the social and economic development of Brazilian municipalities through the valorisation and promotion of their heritage and cultural diversity. The initiative lasted from 2006 to 2011.

Cultural Capitals of Canada was a programme that recognized and supported Canadian municipalities for special activities that harness the benefits of arts and culture in community life. A total of 42 communities were recognised as *Cultural Capitals of Canada* over the lifetime of the programme, from 2003 to 2012 (Government of Canada, 2013).

Despite the abundance of international precedents, the notion of an award to honour city of culture status for a limited period of time only materialised in East Asia in recent years[10]. Until the 2010s there was no similar initiative to the European one in the region. Despite its relative newness, in the last seven years over 20 cities have already been designated *capital/city of culture* in the region, and others are in the pipeline for future nominations. What reasons are behind this apparent recent Asian enthusiasm for the scheme? Are the Asian countries and regions trying to replicate or transplant what could be perceived as positive models into their geopolitical landscapes? Or on the contrary, are they carving their own models that just happen to bear a similar name? Are they perhaps adapting the European concept to their local realities, hence creating hybrid schemes?

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10 The *ASEAN City of Culture* concept was first discussed and adopted at the 3rd Meeting of AMCA on 12 January 2008 at Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, and was launched in 2010 in Clark, Philippines. Kuala Lumpur, capital of Malaysia, and Jakarta, capital of Indonesia were nominated *Capitals of Islamic Culture* in 2009 and in 2011 respectively.

"THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO SET UP A CULTURAL CAPITAL/CITY SCHEME IN EAST ASIA BELONGS TO ASEAN. MARCH 2010 SAW THE INAUGURATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIA'S VERY FIRST *ASEAN CITY OF CULTURE*"

ASEAN City of Culture

FIGURE 1. LOCATION OF THE ASEAN CITIES OF CULTURE (2010-2017)
* A large number of cities were named *ASEAN City of Culture* in the Philippines for the period 2010-2011.
Source: Author's own elaboration; map template courtesy of ASEAN UP.

Chronologically, the first attempt to set up a cultural capital/city scheme in East Asia belongs to ASEAN. March 2010 saw the inauguration of Southeast Asia's very first *ASEAN City of Culture* at the 4th AMCA meeting in Clark, Philippines (AMCA stands for ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts). According to the official documentation, the broad objective of the initiative is "to strengthen the ASEAN identity and raise the profile of ASEAN in the region and internationally, to celebrate ASEAN arts and culture and promote the growth of the region's creative industries, and to promote People to People Engagement, e.g. among practitioners, next generation artists, and the public, cultivating long-lasting friendship among the people of ASEAN" (ASEAN, 2010). The AMCA ministers decided to grant the inaugural honorific *ASEAN City of Culture* for the 2010-2011 biennium to the city of Clark in Pampanga, itself host city of the AMCA meeting. Although it was not initially mentioned in the official documentation, the label *ASEAN City of Culture* was later extended to at least another 10 cities in the

Philippines. In the framework of the 5th AMCA meeting, Singapore was designated *ASEAN City of Culture* for the period 2012-2013. Two years later, the relatively small city of Huê in central Vietnam, former capital of the country from 1802 to 1945, was named *ASEAN City of Culture* for the biennium 2014-2015. More recently, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei's capital city and host to the 7th AMCA meeting in August 2016, is the latest city in ASEAN that has been granted this honorific title, in this case for the period 2016-2017.
Some of the main characteristics of the Southeast Asian scheme are explained below.

Honorific without competition

One of the most prominent features of the Southeast Asian cultural city initiative when compared with its European counterpart (but also, as subsequently will be shown, when compared with the scheme put forward by ASEAN's Northeast Asian neighbours), is the lack of competition to receive the honorific title. The *ASEAN City of Culture* designation is to date solely based on the fact that the chosen city serves as the host to an AMCA meeting. In that respect, the designation acts more as an honorific title transiently awarded to a city/country that happens to host a strategic meeting, than as a planned or mindful effort to select the most suitable location to represent its country and the region for two years. As noted above, the designated city is meant to "raise the profile of ASEAN in the region and internationally" and "promote the growth of the region's creative industries"; however, the Southeast Asian cities do not need to bid or present attractive proposals to be the chosen ones: the fate of being awarded the title is in the hands, for the time being, of a rotational administrative process.

Lack of planning, funding, institutional monitoring and reporting

While ASEAN provides an institutional framework for the *ASEAN City of Culture* initiative to exist, the association's contribution ends there. After the title is conferred to the AMCA meeting host city, little monitoring, supervision or even evaluation of the scheme is performed or encouraged by ASEAN. In fact, often the only official mention of the scheme occurs two years

later on the occasion of the ensuing AMCA meeting; and it is done through joint media statements and without specific mention to the initiative's challenges, achievements or outcomes. The *ASEAN City of Culture* initiative therefore remains a low priority for ASEAN and in general lacks direction, monitoring and supervision.

This is equally the case with reference to funding. ASEAN does not provide any kind of funding to the designated *ASEAN Cities of Culture*, and the financial responsibility is left in the hands of the city itself and, if applicable, of the host country. In a 2013 interview with Ms. Eva Salvador, head of the Cultural Centre of the Philippines' Education Department and member of the organising committee of the first *ASEAN City of Culture* project, when asked about the initiative's funding schemes she confirmed that "while there is no budget coming from the ASEAN fund itself, the member states agreed to spend for it exclusively, or better yet, to combine it with some existing ASEAN events"[11]. In an interview two years later with Mr. Nestor O. Jardin, former president of the same Cultural Centre of the Philippines, he acknowledged that among the biggest challenges to this project's success was the lack of funding from ASEAN, which made it difficult for proper implementation. Apart from ASEAN, Jardin also pointed at the different host countries that "should contribute with more resources (public and private) so that the project can achieve its objectives and become sustainable in a medium/long term"[12].

Unclear definition of what the title ASEAN City of Culture *means*

As previously mentioned, the *ASEAN City of Culture* for 2010-2011 was Clark, in the region of Pampanga (Philippines). However, during the biennium, several other Filipino cities were also awarded (in some cases unofficially) this title. In a January 2010 press release by the Philippines's own National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), two months before the official nomination took place, it was stated that "The Philippines [as a whole country] has been recognized as the 'cultural capital' of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for 2010 and 2011" (IFACCA, 2010). However AMCA, in its official joint media statement, later underscored the appointment of Clark in Pampanga as "the host venue for the 4th AMCA meeting, [and] as the inaugural *ASEAN City of Culture*" (ASEAN, 2010).

Since then, the title changed hands (or was shared) several times before the end of the Philippines' term: in July 2011, barely five months before the end of the allocated biennium, the Filipino press reported the news that Cebu, the Philippines' second city, had also been awarded the *ASEAN City of Culture* title "in lavish ceremonies (…) in various areas around the city" (Interaksyon, 2011). The solemnity of the act was validated by the fact that "Ambassadors of six Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states stood witness as Mayor Michael Rama accepted a certificate from ASEAN ministers of culture and the arts conferring the title 'City of Culture' for two years on Cebu City" (Codilla, 2011). Surprising as this may seem, the designation of Cebu as city of culture was not an isolated case. As recorded in the *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines* of the 20 July 2011 and reported by several media outlets, not only Cebu was joining Clark in Pampanga but also other Filipino cities such as Manila (the country's capital), Angono in Rizal, Tarlac City, Batangas City, Roxas in Capiz, Tagbilaran in Bohol, Cagayan de Oro in Misamis Oriental and Dapitan in Zamboanga (Philippine Government, 2011)[13].

While the Philippines decided to disseminate the title among some of its many cities, Singapore kept it tight within the city-state to the extent that the honour hardly left the island: Singapore *ASEAN City of Culture* 2012-2013 played a minor role in the country's otherwise rich cultural scene. Despite the fact that its original aims of "raising the profile of ASEAN in the region and internationally" and "promot[ing] the growth of the region's creative industries" remained unchanged for this biennium (ASEAN, 2012), Singapore chose to downplay the initiative, and its visibility was reduced to a logo designed to commemorate the occasion, as well as a Facebook page that struggled to go beyond the barrier of 100 "likes"[14], and remained mostly dormant, with an average of 2-3 posts per month. There was also a modest range of events, some with a strong ASEAN component such as an ASEAN Puppetry Festival, an ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium, and an ASEAN Youth Camp, but some others such as exhibitions or generic festivals that had little to do with the abovementioned aims for the initiative, or with little Southeast Asian content[15]. For the duration of the *ASEAN City of Culture*, Singapore remained ambiguous in its engagement and chose to keep a low profile for the regional cultural initiative, in spite of the country's considerable investment of 209.7 million Singapore dollars in the arts in 2012 (Singapore Government, 2012).

While Singapore opted to downplay the inherited *ASEAN City of Culture* title but nurtured it to keep it alive, the initiative visited Huê city in 2014 and left without leaving much of a trace. The designation was

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11 Interview with Ms. Eva Salvador, Head of the Education Department, Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP), 20 August 2013.
12 Interview with Mr. Nestor O. Jardin, former president of the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP, 2001-2009), 10 November 2015.
13 Apart from the cities listed above, other sources mention other cities such as Santiago City, in Isabela province, "which staged the Patarraday Festival" (The Manila Times, 2010).
14 See https://www.facebook.com/pages/Asean-City-of-Culture/220972144680128
15 A non-exhaustive list of events can be found at Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth Singapore (2014). mccy.gov.sg

mentioned in the joint media statement endorsed by the 6th AMCA meeting in April 2014 (ASEAN, 2014), received some initial attention by the Vietnamese press, and included the hosting of the *ASEAN Festival of Arts*, an event organised every two years alongside every AMCA summit. In Huê city, AMCA also promoted culture as a pillar of sustainable development and agreed in principle on the draft of the *Hue Declaration on Culture for ASEAN Community's Sustainable Development.* Despite this initial enthusiasm linked to the hosting of the AMCA meeting, very little more transpired of the type of activities Huê city attached to its designation as *ASEAN City of Culture* during the rest of its biennium.

East Asian Capitals of Culture (EACC)

Japan, China and South Korea have organised the Trilateral Culture Ministers Meeting since 2007[16]. It aims to promote trilateral cultural exchanges and cooperation on cultural activities among the three Northeast Asian countries (Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, 2016). Among other objectives, it set out to "promote the peaceful coexistence, stability and prosperity of the three countries" (Trilateral Culture Ministers, 2007). The first of the meetings took place in Nantong (China) in September 2007, and to date another seven meetings have followed, the latest in Jeju (South Korea) in August 2016. In the framework of these meetings, the ministers of culture of the Northeast Asian countries signed the Shanghai Action Plan of the Trilateral Cultural Ministers' Meeting (2012-2014)[17] to strengthen cultural exchanges among the three countries. One of the key initiatives outlined in the Shanghai Action Plan was the annual appointment of *East Asian Cultural Cities*. This materialised two years later when Yokohama (Japan), Quanzhou (China) and Gwangju (South Korea) were designated *East Asian Cultural Cities* (EACC) (The Japan Times, 2013), in an initiative that according to Mr. Cai Wu, then China's Minister of Culture, was meant to "boost cooperation (...) in multiple fields" (CCTV, 2013). Through the EACC initiative, Japan, South Korea and China committed to "upholding common values as East Asian countries and placing priority on exchanges, the convergence of cultures and the appreciation of other cultures" (Trilateral Culture Ministers, 2013). That translated in the year 2014 to a wide range of cultural activities initiated in each of the cities, which included a Sand Art Exhibition and a Geidai Arts Youth Summit (Yokohama), a Maritime Silk Road International Arts Festival (Quanzhou), and a "Banquet of Dreams" performance festival (Gwangju). While the cultural and artistic programmes of the three cities differed from

each other, the three cities coordinated to produce joint events for the opening and closing ceremonies of the cultural city events, Trilateral Art Festivals, an Arts & Culture Education Forum, and other culture and arts education exchange events.

The EACC initiative continued the following year and 2015 saw another three East Asian cities selected to represent their countries, engaging in "vibrant cultural exchanges and programs throughout the year" (Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, 2014): Qingdao in China, whose most notable activity was a "Five Kings" Talent Competition (singing, dancing, theatre, music and performance) with contestants from the three countries; Cheongju, in South Korea, organised a "Chopsticks Festival"; and Niigata, in Japan, took charge of a Youth Exchange Programme. Ningbo (China), Jeju (South Korea) and Nara (Japan), received the baton in 2016, and Quanzhou (China), Daegu (South Korea) and Kyoto (Japan) are the three designated *East Asian Cultural Cities* for 2017.
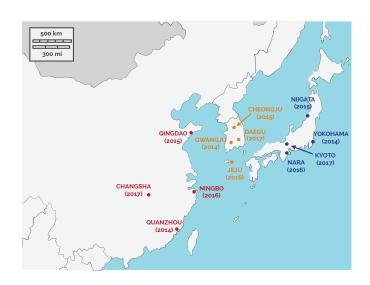

FIGURE 2. LOCATION OF EAST ASIA CULTURAL CITIES (2014-2017)
Source: Author's own elaboration; map template courtesy of *d-maps.com.*

While the Northeast Asian initiative bears a similar name to other "sister" cultural capitals proposals worldwide, a few features underline Northeast Asia's EACC uniqueness, and to some extent help to differentiate it from the European and Southeast Asian counterpart initiatives seen above.

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16 China is represented in the Culture Trilateral Ministers Meeting by its Minister of Culture; Japan by the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and South Korea by the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

17 2012 marked the 40th anniversary of the normalisation of China-Japan diplomatic relations, as well as the 20th anniversary of China-South Korea diplomacy.

Competition

Contrasting with what happens with its Southeast Asian neighbours but closer to its European counterparts, the Northeast Asian cities compete among themselves to be awarded the title of *East Asian Cultural City*. In China, similar to what occurs in Europe, although without its complexity, the cities need to present their candidacies to a jury that votes to determine the winning city. In 2016, Ningbo, Jingdezhen and Changsha (eventually designated city for the 2017 edition) were the finalists for the honorific title, as chosen by a committee of officials from the Chinese Ministry of Culture and experts in the cultural field. The finalists had to defend their cases to the jury in Beijing, and ultimately the committee gave Ningbo the highest score. For the 2017 edition, Changsha along with Harbin and Sanya were the finalists for the title and a similar selection process took place (Crienglish.com, 2016).

The process is similar in the other two countries, where cities compete to be awarded the title. In South Korea, Daegu earned the title as the 2017 city of culture in a four-way competition with Changwon, Iksan and Jeonju. Jury members gave high marks to Daegu's experience of "successfully hosting many international events, its advanced transportation infrastructure and cultural facilities, and good record of cultural exchanges with foreign countries" (Yonhap News Agency, 2016). In Japan, regional cities have shown extraordinary motivation to be awarded the honour to be the *East Asian Cultural City*[18].

Continuity, consolidation, coordination and accessibility

Changsha (China), Kyoto (Japan) and Daegu (South Korea) are *East Asian Capitals of Culture* for 2017. This marks the 4th consecutive year of an EACC scheme that seems to be in good health. Despite the latent regional tensions and repeated diplomatic cooling, Northeast Asia continues its advancement as a geo-political notion (Johnston, 2012: 65; Kang, 2005: 74; Yeo, 2005: 9). The different processes of dialogue and cooperation put in place in the region have also helped foster a stronger sense of regional identity (Dent, 2008: 15). The EACC scheme is the latest but already one of the most notable cultural mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation set up by the three countries in order to smooth relations, maintain ties and improve the region's image[19]. To this end, institutional backing and coordination[20], as well as the support and involvement of civil societies, is key[21]. Since its debut in 2014, the different EACC cities have organised many cultural activities, street exhibitions, workshops, festivals, exchange projects, art installations, forums and symposiums, with active citizen participation.

Among the over 100 art shows and cultural activities organised by Quanzhou 2014 (China), one of the highlights was a Lantern Festival, in which Quanzhou's main streets and cultural venues were decorated with more than "600 Chinese flower-shaped festive lanterns, Japanese-style Odawara cylinder-shaped lanterns and Korean lanterns with painted designs" (China.org.cn, 2014). In Cheongju 2015 (South Korea), a chopstick-themed festival was organised. The Korean city presented an assorted combination of exhibitions and performances to help represent this common cultural aspect among the three countries (e.g. competitions to show off chopsticks skills as well as gigs using the utensils as drumsticks). Also as part of the programme, the Cheongju National Museum presented an exhibition on the history of how chopsticks have evolved in the three nations[22]. Nara 2016 (Japan), with the theme "From Japan's Ancient City, to a Diversified Asia", chose to focus on the promotion of cultural affinity of Asian regions through performing arts, fine arts and food, as well as academic exchanges. The project "To build a ship", organised at Nara's Todaji Temple, saw ten ship carpenters from China go to Japan to construct a traditional wooden ship, similar to those which sailed the East Asian seas in the past. Other artists such as South Korean's Kimsooja had artwork installations at other temples around the city[23].

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18 As highlighted by Ms. Mariko Konno, Senior Officer at the Arts Council Tokyo, during an interview on 23 October 2015.

19 "Even with Asian nations that share the common cultural lineage, Korea has not seen vibrant cultural exchanges, and further, it has shown little interest in cultures of different civilizations. Today, however, international exchanges of performing arts get invigorated throughout a wider variety of cultures and civilizations. (...) Shared sentiment with other neighbouring Asian countries will facilitate the transmission and understanding of messages and implications of performing arts between Asian nations" (KAMS, 2009: 1). This trend is also demonstrated with concrete facts: the recent Performing Arts Market (PAMS), which took place at the National Theatre of Korea in October 2014, had in China its guest of honour.

20 In Japan, the EACC initiative is framed within the actions promoted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). However, international cultural diplomacy actions and cultural exchanges have traditionally been implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Coordination between these two key ministries is crucial if Japan wants to obtain positive results with this initiative.

21 In an interview with Ms. Mariko Konno, Senior Officer at the Arts Council Tokyo, she emphasised that the EACC initiative is one of the few proposals on regional cultural cooperation recognisable today by the Japanese civil society. Ms. Konno was nevertheless sceptical about the project's success in promoting cooperation and better understanding between civil societies, and termed the scheme a bit "chaotic" and without a clear vision. She however, admitted that in the complex regional context of Northeast Asia, the EACC represents a first step that has cultivated some interest in the other countries' cultures.

22 For more information about the "chopsticks festival" in Cheongju, see Yonhap News Agency (2015).

23 For more information on Nara 2016's EACC activities, see Culture City of East Asia 2016 – Nara (2016).

FIGURE 3. LOGOS OF THE THREE EAST ASIA CULTURAL CITIES 2016
Source: East Asia Cultural Cities' websites.

The EACC opens possibilities of participation for the cities' civil societies in accessible programmes open to everyone. As part of the EACC initiative, artists and cultural practitioners also have opportunities to present their works to wider audiences. In 2016, as part of the coordinated EACC programmes between Nara, Jeju, and Ningbo, a film exchange project was organised where three renowned filmmakers, Jia Zhangke (China), O Muel (South Korea) and Naomi Kawase (Japan) produced film stories featuring the EACC cities (Culture City of East Asia 2016 – Nara, 2016). Similarly, strong connections have been fostered at institutional levels, such as the coordination between the Yokohama Triennale in Japan and the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea in the year 2014, as well as among the two cities' museums of art. In 2014 too, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed to organise more tourism promotions in each other's cities; and in 2015, at Cheongju's closing ceremony, the three EACC cities signed a cooperation declaration to establish a long-term mechanism of exchanges (Qdshibei.gov.cn, 2015). EACC cities also coordinate and share resources for their opening and closing ceremonies. For instance, Gwangju's opening ceremony in 2014 featured

dance troupes and puppetry shows from its Chinese counterpart Quanzhou and performances by Japanese teenage pop group Denpagumi.inc, and in return it sent a dance company, S.Y. Dance Company, to perform in the other cities. EACC cities have also developed online platforms, websites and commemorative logos to support their cultural capitals (see figure 3)[24].

Soft diplomacy in a complex geopolitical context

The modern relationship between Japan, South Korea and China is rooted in a complex history. For decades initiatives stimulating cooperation between the three states were practically non-existent (Lee & Lim, 2014: 5). The wounds left by Japanese colonialism in the region and the conflicts experienced during the World War II continued to trouble the political relations between the three nations for years (Johnston, 2012: 67); the three countries took decades to restart the lost diplomatic contact[25]. The "persistence of historical memory"[26] in the region and the consequent widespread distrust hampered communication and interaction between the three countries, and undermined the development of regional cooperation and integration[27]. In the first half of the 2010s the mistrust in the Northeast Asian region was at its worst in decades. Japan and China experienced great diplomatic tension over the sovereignty of the Senkaku islands (in Japanese) or Diaoyu (in Chinese), located in the East China Sea[28]. Diplomatic contact was kept at a minimum and the Foreign ministers of the three countries stopped their regular strategic annual meetings between 2012 and 2015.

Berry, Liscutin and Mackintosh affirm that "at its most ideal, culture is assumed to assuage historical grievance and to effect national reconciliation, regional peace, and global harmony" (Berry, Liscutin & Mackintosh, 2009: 2). Despite the majority of diplomatic tools being temporarily suspended in what Hughes called "the most serious [situation] for Sino-Japanese relations in the post-war period in terms of the risk of militarised conflict" (Hughes, 2013), the three countries' Ministers of Culture continued to meet regularly.

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24 Not all EACC cities commit and invest equally to the scheme. Japanese cities, for instance, usually have their websites and resources translated into English, Korean and Chinese, apart from Japanese. On the contrary, traditionally Chinese and South Korean's EACC cities have kept their resources in their respective own languages.

25 Only in 1965 Japan and South Korea signed their Treaty on Basic Relations; Japan and China signed in 1972 a Sino-Japanese Joint Statement that was later ratified in 1978 with the signature of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the People's Republic of China and Japan.

26 "Many East Asia IR analyses emphasize the constraining effect of historical memory on foreign policy decision making. Whether it is because of the socialization of populations through education systems and popular culture or because leaders themselves genuinely internalize historical memories, there is a common view that constructed memories of nineteenth – and twentieth – century imperialism have hindered political cooperation. (…) In Northeast Asia (…) one of the toughest obstacles (…) is the persistence of historical memory and its role in cultivating hostile, even racialist, images of the Other" (Johnston, 2012).

27 "Asia has seen a huge gap between different nations in terms of political and economic spectrum. Under the circumstances, lack of understanding and information about each other could lead to numerous trials and errors in the process of cultural and commercial exchanges" (KAMS, 2009: 2).

28 To know more about the Sino-Japanese conflict over the sovereignty of these islands, see Hollihan (2014).

In fact, they met in the years 2012, 2013 and 2014, the peak years of the dispute. Furthermore their 5th meeting in Gwangju in September 2013 constituted the first ministerial meeting between the three countries in that year[29]. The *East Asia Cultural Cities* initiative, conceived in 2012, officially proposed in 2013, and first implemented in 2014, was accordingly part of an effort to draw on cultural matters to lessen tension in a period in which much of the high level regional political and diplomatic initiatives were halted. The EACC initiative was hence one of the few soft diplomacy meeting points found by the three Northeast Asian nations to enhance dialogue and cooperation.

Decentralising the power of culture

A key characteristic of the EACC proposal is its marked decentralising approach. While political and diplomatic initiatives often choose capital cities or financial hubs for their strategic actions and meetings, in the cultural realm the chosen locations are secondary cities. Out of the 12 designated cultural cities to date, and with the exception of Yokohama, neither capital cities such as Tokyo, Beijing or Seoul, nor large urban conglomerates or commercial hubs such as Guangzhou and Chongqing in China, Busan and Incheon in South Korea, or Osaka and Nagoya in Japan, have been chosen to represent their countries as EACCs. In the case of China, for instance, the four Chinese cities designated EACC rank 19th (Qingdao 2015), 20th (Quanzhou 2014), 21st (Changsha 2017) and 33rd (Ningbo 2016) in terms of metropolitan area population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010).

"THE *EAST ASIA CULTURAL CITIES* INITIATIVE, CONCEIVED IN 2012, OFFICIALLY PROPOSED IN 2013, AND FIRST IMPLEMENTED IN 2014, WAS PART OF AN EFFORT TO DRAW ON CULTURAL MATTERS TO LESSEN TENSION IN A PERIOD IN WHICH MUCH OF THE HIGH LEVEL REGIONAL POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES WERE HALTED"

Three schemes in comparison

The schemes chosen by ASEAN and the Northeast Asian countries to shape their cultural capital strategies in the 21st century bear similar names to their European counterpart. As seen in this paper, occasionally they might even have drawn some inspiration from it. However, the way the three regions define and implement their cultural capital scheme can be at times quite divergent, and only few resemblances connect them today. In that regard, it could be argued that what makes a cultural capital should only be determined by Asians and not measured by European parameters. Regional policy makers frequently claim that their efforts in the advancement of the Asian regional project should not be judged in relation to the European experience (Ravenhill, 2008). Indeed, there are more Asian voices advocating for localised proposals in the understanding and implementation of international relations and cooperation (Acharya & Buzan, 2007). In the case of the *ASEAN City of Culture*, Southeast Asian countries have largely not replicated the model proposed today by their European counterparts[30]. While the 30 year evolution of ECoC has included new features, rules, and conditions[31], some similarities with the rudimentary scheme put in place by the European countries in the early days of the scheme can be noted:

• As it was the case at the beginning of the ECoC initiative in the mid-1980s, the designation of *ASEAN Cities of Culture* today lies mainly in the hands of ministers responsible for Culture/Arts, with little or no consultation with external parties. In fact, it was as late as 1999 when an international panel was set up to assess the suitability of the cities proposed by the European states, and until 2004 the ECoC designation was mainly an inter-governmental responsibility without

29 Earlier that year, in May, the 15th Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting took place in Kitakyushu (Japan). However, as a sign of the level of regional tension at the time, China only sent a vice-minister to the meeting.
30 At the interview with Ms. Eva Salvador, Head of Education at the Cultural Center of the Philippines and member of the organising committee of the first *ASEAN City of Culture* project, she affirmed that although at the 4th AMCA meeting in Pampanga "there was some mention of initiatives taken by the EU (...) there was no benchmarking using these countries' experiences".
31 As an example, the 1985 European Commission resolution (85/C 153/02) concerning the launch of the *European City of Culture* scheme stated that "as a general rule, only one 'European City of Culture' should be chosen each calendar year" (European Communities, 1985). However this changed over the years: in 2000, the millennium year, was treated by the EU differently, and as many as nine cities were chosen, including two cities of states that were to join the EU only in 2004 (Krakow in Poland, and Prague in the Czech Republic), and two cities from outside the EU (Bergen, in Norway, and Reykjavik in Island).

"THE SCHEMES CHOSEN BY ASEAN AND THE NORTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES TO SHAPE THEIR CULTURAL CAPITAL STRATEGIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY BEAR SIMILAR NAMES TO THEIR EUROPEAN COUNTERPART. OCCASIONALLY THEY MIGHT EVEN HAVE DRAWN SOME INSPIRATION FROM IT. HOWEVER, THE WAY THE THREE REGIONS DEFINE AND IMPLEMENT THEIR CULTURAL CAPITAL SCHEME CAN BE AT TIMES QUITE DIVERGENT, AND ONLY FEW RESEMBLANCES CONNECT THEM TODAY"

the involvement of external experts or any formal assessments (European Commission, 2009: 5).

- While ECoC designated cities currently have at least four years to prepare, this was not the case earlier (e.g. the inaugural Athens 1985 only had seven months to prepare; and after a change in government, Dublin 1991 had little more than a year). This is in line with what designated *ASEAN Cities of Culture* experience today, as their nomination is usually only confirmed well into their official designated period.

- As with the current ASEAN scheme, the beginnings of the ECoC did not include much or any of the socio-economic angling commonly chosen today in many of the selected cities (e.g. social integration of minorities, urban regeneration, and development of new infrastructures, among others).

- As with the ASEAN scheme today, for years competition at the national level to become the designated ECoC was scarce, and only from 2013 the selection procedure was made more competitive at the European level.

- Currently the European dimension, citizen participation and long-term after effects are a precondition for obtaining the ECoC title (European Communities, 2006). However, for years, the ECoC designations lacked a real European dimension, with it being "often weak if not entirely absent" (European Commission, 2009: 8). This certainly resembles the *ASEAN City of Culture* scheme where to date none of the proposals have excelled in their promotion of the Southeast Asian dimension or identity.

While these constitute similarities between the ECoC and the *ASEAN City of Culture* schemes, it could also be argued that they are dated similarities. ASEAN could have certainly learnt from previous cultural capital models such as the ECoC, including its many mistakes and limitations, in order to prevent outdated repetition. Several fundamental differences separate the ECoC and the ASEAN scheme today, and here there is a list of these divergent features:

- Designated cities do not compete among themselves for the title, and the award is mostly honorific.

- In general, the designation does not stimulate the creation of new cultural structures in the chosen city/cities, it does not boost urban regeneration and tourism, and few new cultural activities are fuelled by the fact that cities are awarded the title.

- Despite the initial institutional enthusiasm when the scheme is announced, nominated *ASEAN Cities of Culture* do not receive any core regional funding. This complicates the tasks of strengthening the association's identity and of raising its profile regionally and internationally, something nevertheless still repeatedly outlined in the official statements.

- Seven years into its implementation, in Southeast Asia the scheme still lacks direction, monitoring and evaluation.

- The information on the *ASEAN City of Culture* initiative is also scarce and incomplete, and there are hardly any reliable sources with data, statistics or a basic compilation of activities.

- Southeast Asian countries do not appear to have seriously embraced the scheme and to date hardly any of the aims established in 2010 have been fulfilled. Today, the *ASEAN City of Culture* initiative remains vague and its impact in Southeast Asia's cultural landscape is negligible.

In the case of the *East Asian Capital of Culture* scheme, while it is not replicating the model popularised by its European counterpart three decades ago, it might have drawn some inspiration from it:

- The Northeast Asian cities enter into a competition among candidate cities, and a panel of experts (international in the European case, national for EACC) decides on the most suitable host.

- EACC countries receive time to plan ahead for their title year, although considerably less than in Europe, and there is some level of coordination among the

	EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE (ECoC)	ASEAN CITY OF CULTURE	EAST ASIA CAPITALS OF CULTURE (EACC)
Competition to be the chosen city at the national level	√	X	√
Long-term planning	√	X	X
Substantial financial support from regional institutions	√	X	X
Supervision and monitoring	√	X	X*
Potential for socio-economic development and/or cultural transformation of the city	√	X	√
Instrument to foster tourism	√	√*	√*
Tool of soft diplomacy	√	X	√
Participation of civil societies	√	X*	√

TABLE 1. COMPARISON BETWEEN THE ECoC SCHEME AND THE TWO ASIAN CULTURAL CAPITAL/CITY SCHEMES
* With caveats, as discussed in the text above.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

selected cities which implies basic monitoring and supervision.

· Both schemes understand boosting of cultural tourism as a top opportunity for the cities.

· The Europe of the 1980s and the Northeast Asia of the 2010s are two very different geopolitical realities that however coincide in one fundamental aspect: the usage of culture as a tool for soft diplomacy. In pre-Berlin wall fall Europe, culture, art and creativity were stimulated to stand as equals in front of technology, commerce and economy, as advocated by Ms. Mercouri (Palmer/Rae Associates, 2004: 41); but in a then particularly divided Europe, culture was also seen as a tool to help bring the peoples of Europe together (European Communities, 1985). In a very different time and context, today Japan, China and South Korea are also resorting to the arts to promote knowledge of each other's culture and foster mutual understanding in a period of political pressures. As in mid-1980s' Europe, today's Northeast Asian cultural diplomacy remains one of the main reasons for the EACC scheme to exist.

Conclusion

"Different cities define culture differently" (European Commission, 2009: 6), and this should certainly be taken into consideration when establishing a comparison between these models. Indeed the three cultural

capital/city schemes analysed above are very different from each other. This is normal considering their very disparate geopolitical contexts as well as their dissimilar lifespans: over three decades in the case of Europe and barely eight and four years in the Asian cases.

While some similarities have been noted between ASEAN and ECoC in the modest initial stages, by and large the *ASEAN City of Culture* scheme has not tried to replicate the European model. In spite of this, eight years into its implementation, the *ASEAN City of Culture* has not yet successfully carved its own consolidated and sustainable model, and it requires rethinking if it is to avoid involution or obsoletion.

On the contrary, while the differences among the European and the Northeast Asian cultural capital/city schemes are pronounced, the EACC scheme has drawn some inspiration from its European counterpart. Despite its short life, it can be concluded that EACC has created a hybrid model with its very own characteristics, but it has also adapted some of the European model's features to better suit its unique and complex geopolitical landscape. This combination has laid a foundation that could lead to strengthened ties between regional civil societies, improved perception of the regional "other", and provide sustainability and potential long-term success to this scheme.

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