

China National Day

Regional cities redraw the art map

Chengdu, Jingdezhen and Hangzhou are rediscovering and reinventing old traditions, broadening the national creative scene beyond established hubs like Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, writes **Gayatri Bhaumik**



The Jingdezhen International Ceramics Expo, celebrating the city's heritage of porcelain production. Photo: Xinhua/Zhou Mi

China's existing art centres all serve a specific purpose. Beijing is institutionally and historically important; Shanghai offers commercial significance and major art fairs; Shenzhen acts as the southern hub; and Hong Kong operates as an international gateway and collectors' centre.

Regional cities like Chengdu, Hangzhou and Jingdezhen, however,

are offering new opportunities. "Emerging cities bring new audiences and capital, [while] Beijing and Hong Kong still set validation and international gateways," says Zoe Tsang, sales and marketing manager of Tang Contemporary Art. The benefits of this shift are manifold: galleries gain access to new artists, collectors and audiences; artists have alternatives

to the high costs and competition of big cities; and local governments can use art initiatives to support goals around tourism, culture and urban identity.

But, rather than replacing traditional markets, regional hubs are integrating themselves into China's artistic landscape by playing different roles. Chengdu, for example, connects the southwest

to the country's wider established art network. Art021 Spin – a fair launched in the city in April as an offshoot of Shanghai's Art 021 – potentially becomes a bridge between local artists and national collectors. Conversely, Sanya's established tourism industry offers a built-in audience and infrastructure leveraged from the existing luxury and hospitality ecosystem.

While major art fairs can put a city in the spotlight, it takes more to create the sustainable ecosystem that allows a regional city to become a real arts hub. "[Fairs] don't create an ecosystem from nothing, but they can accelerate one," Tsang says. "[With fairs], people, capital and media arrive at once – what [they] can't replace is year-round galleries, museums and relationships after the fair."

According to her, regional hubs competing with China's traditional art markets must first demonstrate ability, connections, knowledge and discernment. They ought to begin by following the lead of established cities until there's enough of an appetite – alongside strong institutions and mature collectors – to allow experimentation and feed artistic curiosity.

To thrive as a creative centre, these Chinese cities must combine several factors. Artists are fundamental, of course, for

creating commercially meaningful local artwork. But supportive infrastructure is required for viability and longevity. This includes institutions that train artists and form an intellectual network, galleries that showcase the art and provide connectivity, and collectors who create demand and bring financial significance.

On top of that, a city's ability to offer a unique proposition is also crucial. "Rather than trailing the narrative set by Beijing and Shanghai, [emerging markets] must interrogate their own unique DNA to find their place within the broader history of art," says Daphne King Yao, global director of Alisan Fine Art.

This produces an enticing possibility: a spotlight on multiple regions, capturing the full breadth of the country's creative practices. Painting and sculpture have traditionally dominated international perspectives of Chinese art, but the country offers much more. Jingdezhen, for example, has a distinctive cultural narrative based on its history of porcelain production, while Hangzhou has a long-standing tradition of Chinese calligraphy and seal engraving, and Suzhou has a renowned silk industry for centuries.

"The emergence of art towns like Jingdezhen, Chengdu and Shenzhen has brought greater visibility to [China's] diverse techniques and

practices," notes Yao. She cites this year's Chengdu Biennale as an example of how less heralded Chinese cities can "offer a non-Western perspective through which to engage with indigenous art and culture" by showcasing curators and artists "from a wide range of fields and regions".

This development is still occurring and as such, Tsang adds, most emerging markets are still focused on what sells fast – art that's in demand – and therefore have limited ability to showcase the full diversity of Chinese art.

Yao adds that cities like Jingdezhen, which has a specific artistic identity, simply can't represent the entirety of China's artistic landscape. As such, a more geographically diverse Chinese art map won't necessarily result in a more representative one.

As China's artistic geography expands, the question of whether its emerging markets will retain their place within it remains. This will come down to each city's ability to retain artists, develop collectors, build enduring institutions and create a unique artistic identity. The future of Chinese art, therefore, looks likely to be a large yet tightly woven network of cities that each bring a different audience, history and identity to a heterogeneous national art map.