Why We Can’t Stop Talking About Asian Creativity

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In a globalized, post-colonial world, it’s not easy to define Asian creativity. Creativity made in Asia? Creativity made by Asians, anywhere in the world? Creativity that has Asian inspirations and influences?

Chances are, everyone will have their own definition of what “Asian creativity” is to them. And it could very well be that none of those definitions are wrong. There are several ways to define Asian creativity; the concept could be big and multitudinous enough to encompass them all.

However you choose to define Asian creativity, here’s what we want to say about it: whoever you are, whatever you do and whatever Asian creativity looks like to you, you need to pay attention to it.

If you’re a consumer, share it. If you’re a business, pay for it. And if you identify as an Asian creative, keep doing it simply because the future of creativity demands you to. Here’s why.

You are what you eat

To state the obvious, human culture in the 21st century is overwhelmingly visual. In 2015, the tech analyst Benedict Evans came up with the ready-to-go-viral extrapolation that "more photos will be taken this year than were taken on film in the entire history of the analog camera business."

Even if we rightfully take that with a grain of salt, consider the steady feed of user-generated imagery we consume through social media. Banner ads slip through our peripheral vision as we shop, work and communicate online. The hours we clock in watching our streaming service of choice at home. Put all that together and there's no denying the stranglehold of visual imagery on our brains.

As visual culture becomes increasingly globalized, there's no denying that we have come to subsist on the same pool of references, inspirations and viral videos. For decades, the West has largely dominated this visual diet, leading to a global post-colonial hangover.

For instance, Netflix's hit series Squid Game was lauded for the originality of its plot and themes. But many viewers also noted the strong visual similarities between the pink jumpsuits worn by the titular game's guards and the red jumpsuits worn by the robbers on the equally triumphant Money Heist, which had premiered four years earlier.

The cause for the similarity is not just plagiarism, as some armchair critics were quick to say, but points to the ubiquity of the jumpsuit itself—a garment that has served as cinematic shorthand for subversive anonymity since 1969 when a gang of robbers led by Michael Caine chose to disguise themselves with blue work suits to pull off The Italian Job. In a globalized world, where creations from South Korea, Spain and the U.K. all exist about each other, a shared language of what work uniforms look like is creating visual uniformity.

Welcome to the monoculture

It’s not just that our visual references are converging, resulting in more sameness wherever we go. The issue with creative monoculture goes deeper than boredom because visual culture doesn’t just represent the world we live in; it structures the way we think, categorize and communicate.

Take emojis, for example. When you tell yourself to picture “cake,” does a triangle-shaped confection with two yellow sponge layers swathed in white cream appear in your mind? Or a round pastry topped with sprinkles and birthday candles?

If you do, it’s only because these very culturally specific representations of cake have been perpetuated through the visual language of emoji. But what about flower-shaped Chinese mooncakes, or delicately layered Malay Kek Lapis or Vietnamese Banh Bo Nuong, with its intricate, honeycomb structure?

When we allow specific representations to dominate visual culture, we risk creating a homogenous world where anything outside the “norm” becomes obscure or, worse, incorrect. “Cake” would be a lot less interesting if it was only ever just strawberries and cream. And the world would suffer immensely without diversity in our visual culture.

Representation is table stakes

The DEI conversation must go much further than making a live-action Mulan movie and Crazy Rich Asians. For creativity to be sustainable, we need more than diversity in representation. We need diversity in creation.

What that means is giving Asian creators opportunity, but also freedom. Far too often, Asian creators are put in a sandbox of vaguely defined “Asianness” and punished (or just ignored) when they dare to venture out.

Anecdotally, a Korean artist we featured through the Asian Creators Index recently told us a story about how her (in her

own words) “Western clients” told her that her illustrated depictions of Asians were “ugly,” “chubby,” “with too-small eyes” and “not representative of Asians.” To which we say: not representative… to whom?

The world doesn’t need more one-size-fits-all cultural stereotypes. Instead, we need Asian creators to be free. Free to move away from the expected and, instead, make work that reflects their lived experiences, however blurred and multicultural it may be. It is precisely that unexpectedness that is special.

There is a pragmatic dimension to this too. More unique and specific Asian creativity isn’t just good for culture, it’s good for business. Today, 55% of the global consumer class lives in Asia. The Asian region, comprising 48 economies, will account for more than 50% of the world’s GDP by 2030.

According to a report by McKinsey, “Asia on the cusp of a new era,” Asia is becoming the world’s new majority, “accounting for more than half of the global total of many key metrics we use to measure the world economy.” Which makes creative diversity more than an issue of artistry. It is now business-critical.

World, meet us where we are

Finally, to Asian creators themselves, we say this: whatever you’re doing, remember, your creativity is essential.

You may feel lost, stifled, overlooked or tired of making the same arguments and giving the same explanations like a broken telephone. But keep showing up. Keep doing you. Keep making the new, weird, ultra-specific stuff that only you can make.

The world is changing, and soon it will meet us where we are.

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