

## The way of the mécénat: corporate arts funding in Japan

Written by The Conversation

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To a first approximation, arts and cultural funding is a problem at all times and in all places. But each country arrives at a different mix of solutions.

Last weekend I was fortunate enough to be in Osaka to help the Japanese Association for the Corporate Support of the Arts ( [Kigyo M&eacute;c&eacute;nat Kyogikai](#) , or KMK) celebrate its 25th birthday. I also got to visit

[Parasophia](#)

, the Kyoto International Arts festival. If you're anywhere near Japan in the next few months make every effort to get there. Among other things, you'll see work by the sublimely brilliant

[Cai GuoQiang](#)

Unlike in Europe and Australia, the Japanese central government is relatively uninvolved in arts and cultural funding. Mostly that's because post-WWII they had other priorities. And, unlike the US, there is little use of the tax system to incentivise private philanthropy.

So neither the government sector nor private individuals have offered to help the vulnerable arts and culture. So who will?

In 1990 the corporations stepped up to form the association of [m&eacute;c&eacute;nat](#) , which is the M in KMK. (That's a French word because the original concept comes from the French tradition – see the

[ADMICAL Institute](#)

.) For the sake of the Samurai metaphor, I'd love it to be

[just seven companies](#)

, but actually it's more like 439.

With courage and commitment, they've been spending on the order A\$1 million a year, although obviously some do more than others.

But the mécénat concept is certainly not foreign to Japan, which has a long and noble history of corporate support for arts and culture, and of corporate involvement in provision of public

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goods. Often this has taken the form of patronage and serious public art collecting from corporate families.

This has developed into a model of corporate philanthropy and arts sponsorship that is an early and fully-fledged version of what the rest of the world has more recently come to call “corporate social responsibility”.

(Cultural policy expert Nobuko Kawashima has written about the model [here](#).)

The way of the mécénat is to organise as a corporate network, so it’s a lot more than just a bunch of corporations writing cheques for art. They’re attempting what I will describe as “joined-up philanthropy” by coordinating their activities through the KMK and meeting annually to share and workshop ideas. The KMK can then work with local government agencies and arts groups to coordinate projects.

The well-known market failure in the supply of arts and culture (which I’ve [written about previously](#) in this column) usually calls for government action, but in Japan there was government failure too. Which is why the association of corporations stepped up.

They’ve not merely replaced what the government and taxpayers would otherwise have done: they have arrived at what is in effect a new form of cultural policy.

The mécénat model has a number of strengths. The Chishima Real Estate company donated a huge parcel of land and buildings – a disused shipyard not far from central Osaka – on a 30-year gratis term to create a cultural precinct called [Creative Centre Osaka](#). The joined-up nature of the platform means that it can take on fairly large-scale projects.

And it is less risk-averse than you might at first think, sponsoring some highly political artists.

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There are also benefits to the corporate patrons beyond goodwill and reputational branding. The real estate company got to learn of new uses for its land, and stimulated regeneration in a run-down area in which it was heavily invested. Doing good can also mean doing well.

The mécénat model still has room for development. At the Osaka meeting there was much discussion of the need to reach for a more entrepreneurial investment model of philanthropy, something pioneered by the US funds such as the Gates Foundation (and also known as [venture philanthropy](#)).

There was also recognition of the need to experiment with innovative new funding models to leverage social benefits and to engage more directly in [research](#). The KMK, which is largely composed of mature corporations, also reported struggling to get the next generation of start-up firms involved.

Australia has its share of corporate philanthropy and patronage (e.g. [Carrillo Gantner](#) and the Myer Foundation). But in the endeavour to create a coordinated approach to corporate support of arts and culture there is nothing quite like the mécénat in Australia.

Perhaps the present generation of business leaders might like to take up that challenge.

*Jason Potts does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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