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Creative Industries in Beijing: Initial Thoughts

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During a teaching stint at Tsinghua University in May 2005, and then following the trans-Siberian conference organized by the journal *Ephemeria* in September 2005, I began preliminary research on creative industries in Beijing. What follows is a brief report on my experiences, perceptions and meetings in Beijing. My intent is to discern the constellation of forces that might be taken into consideration in future analyses as the research project develops. I should also state that this brief overview of Beijing's creative industries is part of a collaborative project that undertakes a comparative study of international creative industries. In this research we seek to go beyond economic interpretations of creative industries by focusing on inter-relations and geopolitical tensions between trans-local and global cultural flows as they are manifest in labor conditions, intellectual property rights (IPRs), social-technical networks and cultural practices.

From the start, there are many factors and variables that make it a questionable decision even to invoke the term "creative industries" in the Chinese context. The case of China is considerably different from that of Britain, where a creative industry policy was intended to rejuvenate cities with depressed post-industrial economies through new employment initiatives in the cultural sectors and urban renewal that marketed chic lifestyles enhanced by the makeover efforts of cultural workers. Putting aside the critiques that one may advance against creative industry policy in Britain and elsewhere, some basic differences can be delineated: Unlike in Britain, state funding does not exist in China for "creative entrepreneurs," artists, designers, intermediary agencies, etc. Moreover, the economic, social, cultural and historical dynamics of the two countries present a catalogue of differences that disaggregates, at best, any approximation of coherence within creative industries policy as it travels internationally. Common to creative economies across the world, however, is the constitutive role of real-estate speculation, about which I say more below.

Such complications are problematic in the translation of the creative industry concept. For the most part, there is little variation at a policy level as governments internationally incorporate the basic ingredients of creative industry rhetoric (clusters, mapping documents, value-chains, creative cities, co-productions, urban renewal, knowledge economies, self-entrepreneurs, etc.) into their portfolio of initiatives that seek to extract economic value from the production of cultural content and the provision of services. This would suggest that the policy concept of creative industries is divorced from the materialities that compose cultural economies as distinct forma-

tions in national and metropolitan settings.

By deploying the notion of materialities in such a way, I am differentiating between the empirical data enlisted in creative industries policy in the form of statistics on economic growth rates, for example, and an analysis of the political, economic and social network of relations that constitute creative industries as multi-dimensional formations. The former can be understood as a rhetorical procedure mobilized across institutions for political purposes (e.g. effecting policy change and enhancing career portfolios), while the latter consists of an anthropology of institutions and their organization of social relations. All too often creative industry policy corresponds to idealist forms of expression, to put it mildly. Its tendency toward speculation cleansed of inconsistencies and uncertainties, for example, tells us something about the genre of policy, but there is frequently little resemblance to the actual experiences and conditions of those working in the creative industries. While there are undoubtedly material effects wrought by structural processes whose action is shaped by policy directives, this does not mean that policy—as a genre and set of practices generated within the culture of institutions—holds any strong connection to or symmetry with the life-world of cultural economies.

ABSTRACT

This article reports on current developments within "creative industries" in Beijing. The article discusses Dashanzi Art District and the Created in China Industrial Alliance in relation to such issues as labor, intellectual-property regimes, real-estate speculation, high-tech development zones, promotional cultures and the global variability of neoliberal capitalism. The article maintains that creative industries, as realizations of a policy concept undergoing international dissemination, are most accurately understood as cultural practices in trans-local settings that overlap with larger national and geopolitical forces.

Fig 1. 798 Space. (Photo © Ned Rossiter)



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In order to extend the scope of analysis, I propose here a transdisciplinary approach that elucidates the complex array of forces, relations and dynamics at work in international creative industries.

Even in an overview as cursory as the one set out here, however, it is clear that there is vibrant activity and energy across a range of cultural sectors in Beijing. One of the most notable examples is 798 Space, a cultural complex within the Dashanzi Art District situated on the outer limits of the city, not far from the airport expressway. Designed by Bauhaus architects from the German Democratic Republic in the 1950s as an electronics factory for the military (Fig. 1), 798 Space has emerged over the past few years as the scene of avant-garde, experimental work. Adjacent galleries, performance spaces, fashion and design outlets, bookshops, cafes, studios and artists' residencies provide the requisite signs of a cultural complex that is often compared to New York's SoHo in its heyday (Fig. 2).

While Dashanzi is very much a space under construction and inseparable both from its history as a military electronics factory and from contemporary art cultures peculiar to Beijing, it evokes nonetheless a strong sense of familiarity—it is hard not to associate Dashanzi with the phenomenon of high-cultural tourism and cultural precincts now common in many global cities. Such a perception is reinforced by the economic geography of the area: Real-estate speculation and expensive apartment development have exerted a shaping force in the past few years, with artists' rents escalating and plans by the government and the landowner Seven-Star Group to demolish the factory site and establish a high-tech development zone.

According to newspaper reports and the Wikipedia entry on Dashanzi, such a development would enable re-employment of some of the 10,000 laid-off workers for which Seven-Star Group is responsible. Should these plans go ahead, there may well be construction and basic servicing work available for some, but it is hard to envision the possibility of long-term employment for these workers, some of whom are still working in a few small factories that continue to operate on the site. The proposal for the high-tech zone is modeled on Beijing's so-called Silicon Valley in Zhongguancun, which is located near the prestigious Tsinghua and Peking universities. Tsinghua University in particular has strong research-and-development links with this high-tech investment zone and by comparison makes the privatization and R&D efforts by Australia's elite universities notably underwhelming at the levels of infrastructure and pace of development. Whether or not such developments in Beijing and other Chinese mega-cities can become profit-generating innovation machines is another matter. Perhaps, however, it is enough to be in the business of providing highly skilled services across a range of geo-economic scales rather than to expect content to be king. In any case, the business model for the bulk of new media content production in Western economies remains haphazard at best.

Over the past 5 years, Zhongguancun has been transformed from a modest residential area into a high-tech commercial zone (albeit one that also accommodates numerous stores selling pirated DVDs and cheap electronic and computer products), which has driven out many of the previous residents through the esca-

lation of property values and the demolition of homes. If a similar development were to occur in the Dashanzi district, its currently mixed demographic would inevitably be affected, making the prospect of re-employing factory workers even more unrealistic. The skills these workers would need for employment in a high-tech zone is another factor that makes re-employment on a substantial scale unlikely.

It would seem to me, however, that the prospect of Dashanzi as an art district is gaining greater purchase on decision-makers. The site has been host to numerous events associated with the 2003 and 2005 Beijing Biennales, and there is no sign that refurbishment of the old factory buildings has been put on hold, despite recent reports that landowners had put a freeze on new rents and limited renewal of rents until the end of 2005. Amid such uncertainties, one gets the strong impression that Dashanzi Art District will be around for a while yet. Part of its security rests in the fact that the 798 artists are enmeshed with an international contemporary art economy that ensures a degree of connection with international institutions, which is not the case for those undertaking traditional arts and crafts in smaller regional cities. In the meantime, surrounding real estate continues to enjoy a speculative economy, and high-profile companies such as Sony, Christian Dior, Omega and Toyota launch events in 798 Space—chosen as a venue for its industrial chic and upwardly mobile clientele and, it could be added, its correspondence with a sort of standardized global cosmopolitanism (Fig. 3).

An analysis going beyond the descriptions set out above would require scrutiny

Fig 2. Dashanzi Art District. (Photo © Ned Rossiter)



Fig 3. Dashanzi apartment development. (Photo © Ned Rossiter)



of the inter-relations between Seven-Star Group, property developers surrounding the Dashanzi Art District and government cultural development officials; of the political stakes of under- and re-employment of artists and factory workers; and of the role of artists' agencies or representatives in developing "promotional cultures" that take advantage of international events such as the 2008 Olympics. Such a study would amount to a political-economic anthropology of cultural *guanxi* (special relations or social connections/networks). The elaboration of such *guanxi* is not possible in the space provided here and will instead be a topic of research as this collaborative project develops over the coming months.

Further complications arise for comparative analyses because of the dominant association of creative industries with countries undergoing the passage into neoliberal capitalism over the past 15–30 years. The national experience of neoliberalism is not limited to the usual suspects of Western liberal democracies, however. As the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in structural adjustment programs in African countries has demonstrated, neoliberalism—like capitalism—is not singular in any universal sense, but rather universal in its singular manifestations. Similar efforts at extra-national control by foreign capital, coupled with political pressure to instigate a "leapfrogging of modernity," could be seen more recently in Iraq. In theory, such mechanisms of leapfrogging aspire to directly shift developing economies into a neoliberal paradigm of privatization and outsourcing that bypasses the meddling influence of civil society and the state, to say nothing of the political traction wielded by the formation of citizen-subjects. Even the form of de facto structural adjustment that accompanies aid relief efforts for tsunami-affected countries could be added to a taxonomy of neoliberalism and the variegated modulations of global capital.

What, then, does all this mean for the creative industries model when it is located in countries pursuing authoritarian, state-controlled or socialist forms of capitalism? First, it shows that while there is a distinctive homogeneity in the way creative industries travel internationally as a policy discourse, the material, economic and cultural diversity of neoliberal capitalism—its amenability and capacities for adaptation to national and city-state modulations—enables creative industry-style developments to be translated in ways that seem improbable

if analysis focuses exclusively at the level of policy reproduction. Second, these considerations reinforce the need to understand the variable and uneven dynamics of global capitalism, whose indices include the movement of cultural commodities, labor and ideas. Here it is necessary to analyze the constitutive power of intra-regional, international macro-structural and trans-local micro-political forces. In other words, in order to make intelligible the patterns of global neoliberalism, one must attend critically to the peculiarities of sub-national scales (the micro dimension) and weigh these against international forces (the macro dimension). Only then does it become possible to assemble—in no more than a preliminary manner—the complex relations that compose the shifting cartographies and life-worlds of neoliberal capitalism.

One instantiation of such macro-micro inter-relations can be seen in China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and its subsequent need to comply in a more formal manner with IP regimes. This move signaled an incorporation of innovative economies into the predominantly manufacturing-based economy generally assumed to exist in China. This is where nonprofit organizations such as the Created in China Industrial Alliance (CCIA) take on important roles as cultural intermediaries. Toward the end of a wide-ranging and fascinating interview I conducted with Su Tong, the executive director of the Secretariat of CCIA, we hit upon a core definition of the organization: CCIA can best be understood as concept translators. This struck me as an incisive characterization of the complex environment and sophisticated set of principles that enables CCIA to operate across a range of scales, from high-level government-endorsed projects involving the promotion of Chinese culture during the Olympics to the publication of adaptations of fashion and computing magazines held under license by foreign companies.

An increasingly prominent creative industries critique emanating from Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, continental Europe and the United Kingdom holds that a privileging of creative production's potential economic value obtainable through IPRs overlooks such more fundamental factors as class tensions and the precarious condition of labor and life for those involved in production and service work in the creative industries. By contrast, CCIA considers

IPR compliance a key to securing a sustainable future in a global market for creative industries in China and does not consider creative industries exclusive to metropolitan centers and elite cultural sector interests. By way of example, Su Tong highlighted the importance of regional craftspeople skilled in traditional ceramics whose unique designs are illustrative of IP generation specific to regional cultural traditions that are developing entry points into international markets. Su Tong acknowledged the contradiction between IPR compliance as a condition set out by government and supranational trade agreements on one hand, and on the other the necessity for cultural production to retain a capacity to be shared and open in order to make possible the creation of new forms and ideas. Certainly such a tension is not peculiar to China, but can nonetheless be understood as symptomatic of China's current situation vis-à-vis international policy and economic fora, to say nothing of the difficult terrain for organizations such as CCIA, which need to negotiate such complexities delicately in order to retain a relative autonomy and multi-scale engagements with cultural, business and government actors.

This brief report can only provide the barest of detail on the creative industries in Beijing in recent times, and its level of analysis is akin to the gesture of a cultural tourist passing through. Even so, I hope to have conveyed some insight into a few of the prevailing trends and issues defining the cultural sector in Beijing. The research required to develop this project further is contingent on developing collaborative relations with a range of actors across the cultural, political and academic sectors.

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