Creative Industries in Beijing: Initial Thoughts

Ned Rossiter

During a teaching stint at Tsinghua University in May 2005, and then following the trans-Siberian conference organized by the journal Ephemera 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 formations 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.

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 hazardous 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 escalation 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 are 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...
of the inter-relations between Seven-Star
Group, property developers surrounding
the Dashanzi Art District and govern-
ment cultural development officials; of
the political stakes of under- and re-
employment of artists and factory work-
ers; and of the role of artists’ agencies or
representatives in developing “promo-
tional cultures” that take advantage of
international events such as the 2008
Olympics. Such a study would amount to
a political-economic anthropology of cul-
tural guanxi (special relations or social
connections/networks). The elaboration
of such guanxis 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 com-
parative analyses because of the domi-
nant 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 adjust-
ment programs in African countries
has demonstrated, neoliberal—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 insti-
gate 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 privatiza-
tion and outsourcing that bypasses the
meddling influence of civil society and
the state, to say nothing of the politi-
cal 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 mod-
ulations of global capital.

What, then, does all this mean for the
creative industries model when it is lo-
cated in countries pursuing authoritar-
ian, state-controlled or socialist forms
of capitalism? First, it shows that while
there is a distinctive homogeneity in the
way creative industries travel inter-
nationally as a policy discourse, the ma-
terial, economic and cultural diversity
of neoliberal capitalism—its amenability
and capacities for adaptation to national
and city-state modulations—enables cre-
ative 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 dy-
namics of global capitalism, whose in-
dices 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 re-
lations that compose the shifting carto-
ographies and life-worlds of neoliberal
capitalism.

One instantiation of such macro-micro
inter-relations can be seen in China’s ac-
cession to the World Trade Organization
in 2001 and its subsequent need to com-
ply in a more formal manner with IP
regimes. This move signaled an incor-
poration of innovative economies into
the predominantly manufacturing-based
economy generally assumed to exist
in China. This is where nonprofit orga-
nizations such as the Created in China
Industrial Alliance (CCIA) take on im-
portant roles as cultural intermediaries.
Toward the end of a wide-ranging and
fascinating interview I conducted with Su
Tong, the executive director of the Sec-
retariat of CCIA, we hit upon a core def-
inition of the organization: CCIA can
best be understood as concept transla-
tors. This struck me as an incisive char-
acterization of the complex environment
and sophisticated set of principles that
enable CCIA to operate across a range
of scales, from high-level government-
endorsed projects involving the pro-
motion of Chinese culture during the
Olympics to the publication of adapta-
tions of fashion and computing mag-
azines held under license by foreign
companies.

An increasingly prominent creative
industries critique emanating from Aus-
tralia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, contin-
ental Europe and the United Kingdom
holds that a privileging of creative pro-
duction’s potential economic value ob-
tainable through IPRs overlooks such
more fundamental factors as class ten-
sions and the precarious condition of
labour and life for those involved in pro-
duction and service work in the creative
industries. By contrast, CCIA considers
IPR compliance a key to securing a sus-
tainable future in a global market for cre-
ative 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 re-
gional craftspeople skilled in traditional
ceramics whose unique designs are il-
lustrious of IP generation specific to
regional cultural traditions that are de-
voping entry points into international
markets. Su Tong acknowledged the con-
tradiction 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 pe-
culiar 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 defin-
ing the cultural sector in Beijing. The re-
search required to develop this project
further is contingent on developing col-
laborative relations with a range of actors
across the cultural, political and aca-
demic sectors.

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