



Making a cultural cluster in China: A study of Dafen Oil Painting Village, Shenzhen



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A B S T R A C T

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Capitalizing on cultural resources to promote economic and urban development has increasingly become a major concern in cities in the world. This paper examines the case of Dafen Oil Painting Village in Shenzhen, China, which has been transformed from a poor rural village to a major oil painting production centre. This study tries to unravel the realities behind the “Dafen Brand”, with special attention on the forces behind the branding exercise and the associated socio-economic consequences as observed from the doubly deprived painter-workers. Dafen’s art practitioners encounter severe economic hardship similar to the difficulties faced by other rural migrant workers in China’s major metropolises.

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Introduction

Urban landscapes have undergone tremendous transformation under intensified inter-city competition in conjunction with economic and cultural globalization (Harvey, 1989; Knox, 1991). Many countries, including the United States, Great Britain, South Korea and Singapore, have made use of culture to promote tourism and economic growth as well as to foster urban regeneration. In China, recently culture has also become an important policy instrument (Wang, 2001), constituting an integral part of municipal governments’ landscape beautification drives and urban development and regeneration programmes (Wang, 2012; Zhong, 2009). In Shenzhen, for instance, culture development is seen as a strategy to revitalize the “three olds” (old industrial sites, old villages, and old towns).

It is in this context that the Village of Dafen has experienced a major transformation to become an oil painting production hub. Since the publicity of Dafen Village as a cluster of ‘painters’ by the local newspaper Yangcheng Evening Post in 1999 (Wen, 2007), the Village soon caught the attention of the Shenzhen Municipal Government, which was trying to respond to the national call for culture building. Aside from its cultural element, the cluster of trade-painting studios also demonstrates robust growth in revenue. Official reports claim that the Village now occupies over 60 per cent

of the global trade-painting market. It often secures contracts worth of millions of US dollars in the bi-annual Canton (Guangzhou) Trade Fair (Ji, 2010). No wonder, then, the Village has gained applause from all domestic media as a developmental model as well as another miracle of Shenzhen, the symbol of China’s economic reform since its designation as a special economic zone in 1979.

The story of Dafen was chosen to be the main theme of the Shenzhen Pavilion in the Best Urban Practices Zone of the 2010 Shanghai Expo. Dafen, “the most beautiful urban village in Shenzhen”, “integrates urban and rural development”, “showcases how culture development can flourish in an outlying area” (*Southern Daily*, 20-07-2011), and fundamentally “epitomizes the rapid development of Shenzhen” (*China Daily*, 2010). In the 26th Shenzhen Summer Universiade of 2011, Dafen likewise was used to showcase the city’s advancement in the “new economy”.

But behind the promotion displays and branding efforts, what is the real picture of Dafen as an oil painting hub? Is Dafen really a national pride? In what respects does the remaking of this once backward rural village on the outskirts of Shenzhen a result of complex interplays of grassroots initiatives and policy formulations at upper-level governments, including the district government, the municipal government and the central government at Beijing, in the context of “development is the hard principle” preached by the late patriarch Deng Xiaoping? Who are the main actors involved and who benefit most from Dafen’s culture industry-related transformation? What characterize the life experiences of the thousands of painter-workers whose labour is central to the

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making of Dafen as an internationally known, if not renowned, ensemble of production and trading of both Chinese- and Western-style paintings. Fieldworks were conducted in 2011 and 2012 to help answer these questions. The field studies included on-site observations and 50 in-depth interviews, with the purpose of soliciting the views of painter-workers and artists, art dealers, and local and foreign visitors in the village. First-hand data are supplemented by documentary data from Dafen Art, an internal magazine published by the Dafen Art Museum, as well as government documents, newspaper articles, commentaries from critics in the West, and artists' blogs.

In the next section we review in greater detail the literature on culture as an industry and an urban development and regeneration strategy. Then, we discuss the efforts undertaken by the Shenzhen and Dafen authorities to build cultural industries, and how these initiatives are related to China's hierarchical territorial governance structure and the division of the Shenzhen Municipality into two distinct zones: the special economic zone (SEZ) and the rest of the city. Next, both field investigations and documentary evidence are invoked to further unravel what constitute the "Dafen Brand" in the context of the industrialization of art and culture, and also the plight of Dafen's struggling painter-workers. Hand-painted copies of masterpieces are primarily targeted at the US and European markets in response to rising consumerism in post-industrial societies. Yet, Dafen is seen by art critics in the West as a hotbed of forgeries. In the conclusion section, we argue that any model of culture-led growth has to take account of the cultural-historical meanings of the particular locality.

Culture as an industry and urban (re)development strategy

The meaning of culture is always subject to contestation, so is that of cultural industry/industries. Debates can be traced back to the Frankfurt School in the 1940s (Horkheimer & Theodor, 1972), which coined the term Culture Industry to describe how art and culture, used to be practised in a tailored aura, was installed on Fordist production lines, that is, converted to standardized products without enlightenment value. Studies on pop culture in the United Kingdom, nevertheless, maintain that massively produced culture might serve as a hotbed for free expressions and spur social and political reflections (Morley & Chen, 1996). Recently, attention on culture as capital has surged in post-industrial economies to counteract the decline of manufactory industries (Castells, 2000; Scott, 2006; Swedberg & Schumpeter, 1991). The merge of culture and urban regeneration can be dated back to the 1970s and early 1980s, when cities in the post-industrial era were experiencing massive economic restructuring and declines (Lin & Hsing, 2009). Inspired by cases of culture-led urban renaissance like Bilbao, mayors and other decision makers have detected the robust power of culture in urban regeneration (Peck, 2005). Cultural remaking of cities is engineered worldwide. Examples include the "European City of Culture" initiated by the EU and the "Creative City Network" by the UNESCO. Under this account, culture-themed mega projects, cultural clusters, and mega-exhibitions (such as the World Expos and Olympics) and festivals are promoted as strategies to boost urban growth and renaissance (Evans, 2003).

Advocates contend that culture-centred development creates a post-industrial urban landscape, which helps to attract investment, and improve public finance and economic competitiveness (Strom, 2002; Whitt, 1987). The construction of cultural infrastructures and launching of arts festivals serves as catalysts for job creation and urban revitalization. Critics (Harvey, 2001; Zukin, 1995), however, argue that it unavoidably causes problems such as overlooking citizen's identity building and local cultural meanings. Moreover, the costs of cultural projects are often borne by those who can least

afford them. And rising rent displaces artists and other creative professionals (Lloyd, 2006; Zukin, 1982). Questions are therefore raised regarding the politics involved in the formation of creative groups and their spaces: What is considered creative or innovative and who benefits from this process (Christopherson & van Jaarsveld, 2005; Indergaard, 2009)?

In recent years the notion of cultural industry has been taken up by policy makers in China, where culture is now recognized as a significant regional and urban development tool (Oakes, 2006). The central government officially declared cultural industries to be part of the national development strategies in the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) (MCPRC, 07-2000). In 2004, the National Bureau of Statistics defined "cultural industries" as activities which provide products and services of culture and entertainment to the general public and other related activities (NBSC, 2004). The current (12th) Five-Year Plan (2011–2015) further identifies culture industry as a pillar industry. At the same time, culture-related urban regeneration has also caught the attention of policy makers. The 798 Art District in Beijing probably is the most frequently cited case, in which artists, dealers, galleries, art critics, art fairs and biennales are interwoven into a tight network, resembling the Western model of artist ecology (Markusen & Schrock, 2006; Pratt, 2004; Wang, 2012). Many cities have formulated detailed plans for cultural development. For instance, over 80 creative industrial parks emerged in Shanghai within two years after the introduction of "Creative Industrial Park Programme" in 2004 (Wang, 2009; Wang & Li, 2011).

Development of cultural industry in Shenzhen and Dafen

Shenzhen

To contextualize the development of Dafen as a trade-painting centre, it is useful to review the development of cultural industry in the City of Shenzhen as a whole. Shenzhen was designated as a SEZ in 1979, where preferential policies were offered to incoming investments (Li, 2009). Along with other localities in the PRD, the "front shop, back factory" (*qiandian houchang*) model characterized Shenzhen's early economic growth. Within a short period of time, Shenzhen was transformed to a manufactory base housing thousands of factories, mainly relocated from Hong Kong. The main industries were textiles and garments, rubber and plastics, toy manufacturing, and consumer electronics.

Initially, the official concern on cultural development was mainly about building an identity so as to glue Shenzhen's essentially immigrant population together. In a survey on home consciousness, 18.6% of the respondents denied Shenzhen as their home, and 31.1% were not sure whether Shenzhen was their home or not (Pang & Ulan, 2008: p. 62). The issue of discovering, if not cultivating, the local culture to develop loyalty of its habitants and more importantly, enterprises, became pressing in the early 2000s, when many firms moved from Shenzhen to other cities. The blog "Shenzhen, who abandoned you?" that caught national attention in 2004 perhaps exemplified the challenges faced by the municipal government (Wo, 2002). Experiencing its first economic stagnation since founding, the city was enveloped by a feeling of loss of orientation. The national call for developing cultural industry in 2000 was a call just in time.

In January 2003 the Shenzhen Municipal Government introduced the slogan "Build the City on Culture" (*wenhua lishi*). The slogan was changed to "Build a Leading Cultural City" (*wenhua qiangshi*) in 2009 to stress the government's determined will to join the world city league. In order to nurture a "cultural economy", the Shenzhen Municipal Government has designated Cultural Industry to be the fourth pillar industry, after high-technology, finance and

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