



# The 798 Art District: Multi-scalar drivers of land use succession and industrial restructuring in Beijing



Yimei Yin <sup>a</sup>, Zhigao Liu <sup>b,\*</sup>, Michael Dunford <sup>b</sup>, Weidong Liu <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Tourism, Beijing Union University, Beijing 100101, China

<sup>b</sup> Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China

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## ABSTRACT

Since the post-1980 economic reforms, Chinese cities, in particular large cities, have experienced far reaching industrial restructuring and spatial transformation. A decentralization of manufacturing industries from urban centres was accompanied by the rise of service and creative industry districts on previous industrial sites. This article explores the interconnections of global forces, state–market relationships, land use policies, art markets, the Chinese system of governance, and other trans-local factors in transforming Beijing from an industrial city to a service and creative industries-oriented global metropolis, by examining the rise and transformation of Beijing 798 Art District. The case study finds that decommissioned industrial sites had characteristics that made them attractive when central and local governments started to promote creative industries, but, with development of urban art districts, the impact of avant-garde artists on the direction of development was reduced, and developers, high profile galleries and multinational corporations had an increasing influence. The results of our study indicate that the literature on intra-metropolitan location and change, and the evolution of industrial districts should pay more attention to the reuse of the decommissioned industrial land and sites for industrial restructuring, and particularly to the role of multi-scalar factors in reshaping the geography of cities.

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## Introduction

China's economic reforms and rapid economic growth have radically reshaped the geography of Chinese cities. Chinese cities have experienced a decentralization of industry from the centre (Gao, Liu, & Dunford, 2014; Hsing, 2010) and the re-use of abandoned industrial sites (Ren & Sun, 2012; Zheng, 2011). These processes of land use succession involve important elements of path dependence but are also driven by wider forces operating at multiple scales, and have gone hand in hand with changes in the character and relative importance of services and creative industries.

As political control over culture was loosened and the economic value of culture was recognized, creative industries have been promoted by various levels of government in China to diversify the established urban economy, leverage human capital and cultural resources, generate urban economic wealth and employment

opportunities, and create vibrant public spaces, cultural diversity and social inclusion. Creative industries are predominantly in metropolitan areas (Zheng, 2011; Zielke & Waibel, 2014; Yusuf and Nabeshima, 2005). Examples include Factory 798 and Songzhuang (Currier, 2008; Liu, Han, & O'Connor, 2013; Ren & Sun, 2012; Sun, 2010), Nanluoguxiang (Shin, 2010) in Beijing, Red Town and M50 (Wang, 2009; Zhong, 2010) in Shanghai, White Horse Lake in Hangzhou (Wen, 2012) and Dafen in Shenzhen (Li, Cheng, & Wang, 2014).

As the Beijing 798 Art District is a symbol of a new industrial civilization in China and the pioneer of the new Chinese creative industry, it is used as a case to explore the rise and transformation of creative industrial districts in China, and argue that their developments must be examined in ways that bring together generic drivers with the specificities of the case. General mechanisms always operate through specific events and contingent factors can often impinge on urban development trajectories (Liu & Dunford, 2012). In China these relationships are moreover profoundly shaped by aspects of Chinese system of governance.

An increasing number of theoretical and empirical studies have dealt with the spatial distribution and locational characteristics of

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 10 6488 9529; fax: +86 10 64889302.  
E-mail address: [liuzhigao@igsnrr.ac.cn](mailto:liuzhigao@igsnrr.ac.cn) (Z. Liu).

creative industries in China, and the factors driving their development (Liu et al., 2013; Sun, 2010; Wang, 2012; Xiong, 2009; Zielke & Waibel, 2014), without fully grasping their complex and changing nature, and underestimating the role of global forces, state–market relationships and land use policies in driving change. This paper develops a more integrated evolutionary and multi-scalar perspective, combining general (urban real estate development and globalization) with specific logics (Chinese policies relating to property rights, economic transformation, culture, governance, etc.) to understand the transformation of a prestigious industrial site into a space for creative industries.

The paper itself is divided into five parts. **Methodology** section outlines the methodology. In **Theoretical background: cultural industries, geographies of decentralization and land-use succession** section a conceptual framework is outlined. **Beijing's transition from an industrial to a creative city** and **The example of the factory 798 Art District** sections examine the rise of Beijing as a creative city and the case of the 798 Art District. **Discussion and conclusions** section concludes.

## Methodology

This article draws on five years of participant observation of Beijing's creative industry projects including the 798 district by the first two authors in their role as local government planning consultants, and a recent round of surveys and personal interviews carried out in late 2010 and early 2011. More than 20 senior local officials working in bureaus of land management, urban planning, Development and Reform Commission, Zhongguancun Science Park Administrative Committee, and the 798 Art District Construction & Management Office and 40 art-related businesses were interviewed. In October 2013 to May 2014 further surveys and interviews were conducted with art-related businesses and in particular with new post-2011 entrants. This primary research data were supplemented by secondary data.

## Theoretical background: cultural industries, geographies of decentralization and land-use succession

The story of Factory 798 is a story of rent-driven land-use succession that was achieved (industry to art district), non-achieved (an electronics industry project) and achieved through upgrading (arrival of high end galleries and advertising), a story of a transition from industry to services and in particular to a subset of cultural industries and of subsequent art district upgrading into higher revenue-earning activities, a story about the path-dependent nature of development and a story that involves the interaction of processes unfolding at different scales.

At least three areas of research have a bearing on the issues examined in this paper: studies of (1) the rise of services and the development of creative and cultural industries, (2) intra-metropolitan location, and (3) urban land-use. In a Chinese context, attention must also be paid to the specificities of the Chinese context.

These processes of transformation involve changes in industrial structure and land-use that are moreover multi-scalar and evolutionary or path-dependent. At any point in time, multiple projects and proposals may exist, and the struggle between them can significantly shape medium-term trajectories. These evolutions involve general processes of industrial restructuring and ground rent- and planning-driven land use succession but always reflect more specific developments and a series of critical events at a range of scales from the national (reform of Chinese cultural policy), up to the global (the international relations of the Communist era, Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics, the intervention of

international organizations), and down to the local (relocation of art schools, local artists choices and local government actions). What happens in a place reflects local factors but also reflects the impact of wider forces.

## *The rise of cultural and creative industries inside and outside China*

In the 'The coming of the Post-Industrial Society' Bell (1974) predicted a radical change of economic focus from goods to services. More recently, services have come to occupy a larger share of output and employment. Questionable observation of these trends has even led to the idea that services can provide an alternative basis for economic growth to manufacturing (Gershuny, 1977). The service sector includes dynamic and non-dynamic sectors and tax and market-financed services. These activities include the cultural industries (originally identified by Frankfurt School theoreticians Adorno and Horkheimer to denote the mass production of standardized cultural goods). The cultural industries are frequently construed as creative industries in which human creativity is harnessed to promote innovation (Caves, 2004; Landry, 2000). These industries are concentrated in large cities where major cultural industry players are located and where government-funded galleries, museums, libraries and universities are strongly represented and talented people are attracted.

This situation led to a strong desire on the part of city authorities to promote the development of cultural industry clusters. The development of creative spaces depends, however, on a global marketplace for cultural goods and services, national and local institutions, creative industries (players of the game such as artists, traders and consumers of artworks, industry associations, educational and training institutions and regulators) and the relationships, practices and norms that shape and constrain their social interaction. Among the players in China, the state is critical due to its centralized governance structure.

In China, the commercialization of cultural products was absent for a long time (Keane, 2011), since, in traditional Marxist–Leninist ideology, cultural products served socialist-ideological functions and did not have an economic function. It was not until 1998 with the establishment of the Department of Cultural Industries under the Ministry of Culture that the economic value of cultural production was accepted by the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese state. Two year later, cultural industries were officially recognized as an economic sector for the first time in one of the 'recommendations' of the 10th National Five-Year Planning (Keane, 2009a, 2009b). Since then, some state-subsidized public cultural service units or public institutions have been gradually transformed into state-owned cultural enterprises, policy environments have gradually become creative industry-friendly, and the aim of making China an innovative country by 2020 contributed to the construction of innovation-related policy systems that embraced creative industries.

In China, governance remains characterized by strong top-down mandates. Once central government decided to develop the cultural and creative industries, local governments actively promoted cultural and creative industries (Zielke & Waibel, 2014). For example, 16 county-level governments in the Beijing announced the development of creative industries and establishment of creative parks. The contribution to employment and economic growth of the cultural and creative industries increased (Tables 1 and 2).

## *Metropolitan industrial structure and intra-metropolitan industrial and service location*

In economic and urban geography there are numerous studies of metropolitan industrial decentralization in developed countries

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