



## Cultural industries and creative clusters in Shanghai



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### ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a 3-year (2008–2011) research project (This project has received funding from Australian Research Council between 2008 and 2011. Project no. LP0991136. The official title of the project is 'Designing Creative Clusters in Australian and China'. This project works in partnership between Queensland University of Technology, Shanghai Jiaotong University, ARUP and 'Creative 100'.) on creative clusters in China, documenting and investigating the proliferation of 'creative clusters' in three cities – Shanghai, Shenzhen and Qingdao. This paper focuses on one of them – Shanghai – the first to adopt the concept of 'creative clusters' in China and which has the largest stock of creative clusters.

Most theorizations of 'creative clusters' are based on the experience of post-industrial cities in the West. This paper attempts to add to the emergent accounts of creative clusters from experiences in Asian cities. Using the empirical research in Shanghai, this paper will identify where cluster theories fall short in application to a very different social, political and culture context.

In a different fashion to the 'organic' emergence of neo-bohemian cultures, lifestyles and creative industries zones well known in cities such as New York, London and Berlin, most of the Chinese creative clusters have been developed by real estate developers in partnership with local governments – often directly invested in by these local governments. This paper examines the basis, development process and the meaning of these 'official' creative clusters within the wider urban context.

In this paper, I will focus on one aspect – the relationship between these creative clusters and their urban forms. I choose three conceptual approaches used to explain such relationships in Western creative clusters. Attempting to operationalize a policy concept borrowed from the West, Chinese creative clusters assume this can be applied in a different urban and national context. But can they? I discuss three creative clusters: 'M50', 'Tianzifang' and '1933' in Shanghai, all developed according to western cluster theories.

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### Introduction: Creative industries and urban form

Is it naïve to even start thinking about the fact that a city should be preserved for the use of small scale and less commercially driven creative businesses these days? If not, what kind of reason can we use to argue in favour of sustaining such creative industries in the city? These are the questions I had when immersed in my research fieldwork in Shanghai, which started in 2010. In the first twelve months, the research project surveyed 120 clusters in Shanghai using the Google mapping tool. This was followed by qualitative interviews with 60 creative entrepreneurs, 25 cluster managers, 30 academics and other key informants.

Against a background of Western theories on organically emergent cultural quarters, cultural zones and cultural milieus, this research project tried to test these theories in a very different urban context. The initial interviews and observations showed that 'creative cluster' carried different meanings in China. First, organic clusters are rare in the sense that most clusters are controlled by the state. Second, clusters often have clearly marked (and often gated) spatial boundaries. Third, most clusters are managed by companies who assume the responsibility of a body corporate. Fourth, increasingly clusters are purpose built targeting specific cultural/creative industry (CCI) sub-sectors.

There are over 100 creative clusters across the city – all purpose built for one or a combination of different CCI. Or at least they all claim so. The project discovered that over 80% of the clusters are not self-sustaining – many rely on

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government funding to make up for lack of rental income. On the other hand 95% of small and medium sized CCI businesses in Shanghai are located outside of these official clusters. Interviews with CCI businesses suggest that there is a deep skepticism as to the benefits these creative clusters bring to the wider CCI sector. It is hard at first to understand why there would be such lack of 'fit' between the local CCI and these amazingly built/restored clusters that are purpose built/renovated for them. What's the problem?

The research fieldwork supplied the following answers from amongst the target client group of artists and small scale/start-up CCI businesses: 'the rent is too high'; 'no social space within'; 'public transport access is lacking'; 'no industry connections'; and 'too much reporting to the government involved'. Many CCI that might have been able to afford the rent (many could not) choose to go with more conventional business locations in the CBD.

What is interesting about these responses however is that no one mentioned the design of these clusters, most of which are listed heritage sites and have undergone significant transformation. The physical appearance of these clusters is believed to be the key attraction for CCI businesses – they tell stories about Shanghai which local CCI businesses are able to identify with. 'M50', a Chinese contemporary visual art cluster, used to be a textile factory when Shanghai was the manufacturing center of China in the 1920s. 'Tianzifang', the Shanghai lifestyle cultural tourism cluster, was built to house workers emigrated from nearby Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces – many of whom went to work for the then booming textile industries. '1933', a design and exhibition cluster, was a slaughterhouse for the international concessions. These buildings, along with many other similar developments, have been chosen to be re-branded to meet the needs of local CCI.

The 'elective affinity' between that many commentators have identified between the urban built form of the inner city and the CCI (Hutton, 2006; Van Heur, 2010; O'Connor and Liu, this issue) suggests a complementarity between the 'hard' and the 'soft' infrastructure in creative quarters. In China, the general feeling is that with the hard infrastructure, comes the soft infrastructure (有了硬件,才能发展软件). However, in the disconnection of creative clusters from local CCI milieus, this paper identifies serious problems with this kind of expectation.

Before this we need to review existing claims made about the correlation of creative industries and their environment.

There is no shortage of Western literature on the built form of creative clusters. Many have pointed to the ways in which certain areas of the city may embody historical memory, local identity and a kind of grainy authenticity. CCI are often seen as exemplary in the way they and their milieu identify with these areas and might even incorporate them into the content or branding of their business. CCIs have been seen as highly conscious of, and responsive to, the embodied symbolic qualities or aesthetics of place (cf. Bassett et al., 2002; Garnham, 2005; Scott, 2000). Some suggest that the products of creative industries are reflexive of their surroundings (cf. Caldwell, 2008; Drake, 2003; O'Connor, 1997; Scott, 1996). Others suggest creative clusters are attractive because the built form offers the opportunity for businesses within to make

their own physical and symbolic mark (cf. Zukin, 1991, 1995).

Scholars arguing the importance of culture to urban renaissance have stressed the necessary links to local and regional planning and urban regeneration (Evans, 2001; Garcia, 2004; Hall, 2000; Miles & Paddison, 2005), giving rise to claims for a distinct discipline known as cultural planning (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Laundry & Bianchini, 1995). These claims emphasized new flagship buildings (cf. Tallon, 2010) often involving bringing redundant industrial infrastructure back into use: manufacturing quarters, residential areas and heritage building sites.

Artists and cultural actors have been the pioneers in the adaptive use of industrial buildings. In urban regeneration strategies, the role of artists and other cultural actors can be prominent – at least in the initial stages. Sharon Zukin's (1989, 1995) work on the Soho district of Manhattan, Colin Ley's in Canada (2003), or O'Connor and Wynne's (1996, 1998) on the arts-led regeneration strategy adopted in Manchester serve as examples. These works point to the mixed use of space including cultural consumption, production and living spaces that are key characteristics of some artistic or 'neo-bohemian' (Lloyd, 2006) areas of North American cities (Currid, 2007; Markusen, 2007; Molotch & Treskon, 2009; Mommaas, 2009; Scott, 2005). Richard Florida's (2002) adaption of these tendencies through turning the presence of the 'creative class' into a casual dynamic of urban economic growth are both well known and comprehensively critiqued (cf. Peck, 2005).

More recently, Hutton (2010)'s study of the process of how creative industries occupy selected inner city urban spaces tries to make the theoretical transition from those concerned with the materialization of cultural production in the city (much of the discussions on post-industrial cities), towards the symbolic construction of places. Hutton claims that this is a new kind of 'recombinant' economy characterized by a complex combination of cultural production (the core of a robust urban economy based on innovation and creativity) and consumption services (the presentation of spectacles and genuine social life).

Hutton's account draws on the earlier work of Jane Jacobs and Sharon Zukin. Jane Jacob in her famous book on the *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) suggested the built form of old buildings supply the stock of urban spaces for alternative business and cultural activities because of their unique character, low rent and adaptability to new uses. Her work began a long concern with the potential cultural use of heritage industrial buildings. For example, recent research commissioned by the heritage lottery fund in England argued that 'new ideas need old buildings' (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2013). Heritage buildings, they argued, have greater links to CCI than other economic sectors and they are also more popular among small CCIs. They argue heritage buildings connect ideas with their environment, manifesting the authenticity and originality of local creative producers. Such arguments have been popular among urban planners faced with the classic dilemma of regeneration: the soaring cost of renovating old buildings and the responsibility of preservation. The linkage to creative industries helped soften the planning restrictions on heritage buildings unlocking potential for these urban locations to be used by the new CCI.

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