

The Wasteland of Creative Production: A Case Study of Contemporary Chinese Art

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Abstract

With the new magnitude for the relatively unhindered production and circulation of artworks, galleries and contemporary art museums are burgeoning across the larger cities of China. This article provides an empirical example of how contemporary and avant-garde art is produced and valued in the art communities that thrive on the recent international recognition of Chinese artworks. It addresses some of the effects that occur when art production becomes mediated by cultural entrepreneurs and propelled by resourceful investors. Challenging notions of autonomy and independence in the sphere of aesthetics and contemporary art, the article addresses some of the ways in which art becomes co-opted, not only by commercial agents, but also by official ambitions. The commercialization of the cultural sphere reveals a paradigmatic shift, giving a stronger emphasis to the intangible notion of creativity as a new driving force for economic development in China.

Keywords: China, contemporary art, creativity, markets, cultural industry

Creativity on the Agenda

Stimulated by the economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s, China's re-emergence, now as a market force, might just be one of the most influential events of our time. Although at present the Chinese economy faces difficult challenges, there is no doubt that China already has installed itself as a key actor when it comes to trade and international politics, showing advances in science and technology and research and development (OECD 2007; Ikenberry 2008: 23). Increasingly, the rise of China is no longer dependent only on the labour-intensive production of cheap commodities but China has come to insert itself firmly in the international market for cultural products. There is a shift in orientation from low-cost manufacturing to high-tech and high-value products and services. China has now moved beyond the 'Made or Copied in China' era toward another era where things are now 'Created in China' (Jiang 2008: 121). Massive billboards, business slogans and advertisements that

occupy urban space everywhere in the ever-changing cityscapes of China are saturated by a renewed emphasis on creativity and innovation. Even official policies have recently tuned into the global currents of creativity as a tool for economic growth (Rossiter 2008: 121). Hence, with China's current interest in creativity and cultural production, various forms of cultural expressivity, and in particular the visual arts, are experiencing a revitalization. This article will assess how such revitalization shapes the production of contemporary art in China by looking into one of the most dynamic and rapidly developing art production villages in China, the Songzhuang Artist Community. The arguments presented are based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork, mainly conducted among artists and cultural entrepreneurs in Songzhuang.

From Dissident to Superstar

In a not-so-distant past, the 'floating artists' (盲流艺术家) of the late 1980s and early 1990s migrated into the Chinese cities. They would often live vagrant lives, struggling to maintain their artistic aspirations in a political climate that did not accept this kind of migration or support artists such as these (Wu 1990; Lu 2001: 143-144). Chinese artworks have now moved into the spaces of some of the most prestigious fine art venues around the world. A handful of the artists who had a breakthrough in the 1990s have become 'superstar artists' (明星艺术家), living luxurious high-flyer lives as a part of China's nouveau riche (*Time Magazine Asia*, 12 Nov. 2007: 27). Some have even become proprietors of large enterprises investing in other fields such as large hotels and restaurants.

Often Chinese avant-garde and contemporary art is positioned and presented as directly opposed to the official sphere – as counter-culture. The findings in this article, on the contrary, argue that the networks that produce these artworks stretch across the border between the official and unofficial, and that such a distinction might even be misleading. Empirical data presented here suggest that the popularity and international recognition of contemporary and avant-garde Chinese art create new possibilities for the production of artworks. However, the new opportunities also bring with them new challenges that, in turn, affect how artists must finance their production and promote their art vis-à-vis the market for cultural goods. Although critics and art devotees often position the artist community of Songzhuang in opposition to the more established and commercial sites for art production (and consumption), artists here commonly take a more critical stand towards current devel-

opments. As this article shows, practitioners experience a redundancy of similar artistic expressions. Working as an artist in Songzhuang, one is prone to gain recognition through the production of recognizable tropes, following the artistic styles of Chinese artists that have already been consecrated by Western art institutions that look to China for new fields of creative expressivity.

Theoretical Approach

The analytical perspective applied in this article combines a brief look into the way contemporary Chinese art has been appreciated with a more general focus on the nexus between art, economy and the development of cultural institutions. First, I will make a critical foray into the Western gaze on the sphere of contemporary visual arts in China from the 1980s onwards. Second, treating aesthetics in art production vis-à-vis the economic sphere of exchange, I will explain the current trends of artistic expression in communities of Songzhuang as a direct consequence of the commoditization of local (i.e., non-Western) art worlds, and the institutional development of a professional art industry.

On 5 February 1989, the first official avant-garde art exposition was launched at the Beijing National Art Gallery. More than 200 artists participated with artworks and performances. This event formed an important moment in the Western understanding of the Chinese art scene, as the redeeming breakthrough where the buds of a civil society would surface. However, shortly after the opening these buds were trampled down as the show was closed due to several unannounced art performances (Kraus 2004: 133).¹

Epitomized as an example of the zero-tolerance stance of the Chinese party-state, the avant-garde exposition perfectly paved the way for the all-time avatar of an oppressed civil society, the Tiananmen Square Massacre. As observed by China scholar Michael Dutton:

Relying on a familiar semiotic code that was almost theological in intent, the man and the tank fulfilled Western yearnings for an individual ethics of heroism and an interpretation of the world through the prism of simplistic binary opposites (Dutton 1998: 18).

The alignment of these two incidents compels the spectators and buyers of Chinese contemporary and avant-garde art to submit to the 'individual ethics of heroism' and hence to understand creative production in the visual arts as something that destabilizes and challenges the hegemony of the state, as also implied in the term *underground art*.

Despite the immense political and economic changes that have taken place in the official stance towards contemporary and avant-garde art within the last two decades, it appears that the appeal for mainly Westerners to understand and interpret Chinese avant-garde and contemporary art as overtly political in a very narrow sense is a persistent tendency. It is so widespread that artists are often interpreted as engaged in dissident activities, which renders their artworks simplistic expressions within an envisioned heroic 'unofficial' or 'pro-democratic' art (Hou 2002: 24-25).

Treating the proliferation of Mao Zedong paraphernalia in contemporary Chinese society, Peter Hitchcock observes: 'the impact of commoditization has picked away at the social function between the artist and the state. And the tension in this process of rapid transformation has spawned an intensely agonistic art' (Hitchcock 2001: 268). Unquestionably, artists from China experience how new doors are opened through the market with the help of a new range of cultural entrepreneurs, allowing for seemingly critical images to emerge (Stallabrass 2006: 37-43). However, when we consider which Chinese contemporary artworks are appreciated in the Western art institutions, we might bring into question whether this art justly might still be considered agonistic.

Another central aspect that might explain why contemporary Chinese art is often understood from a binary perspective – as artist vs. state – is the institutions that consecrate artworks and the professional art discourse that has grown out of these institutions. The rise of a multicultural world of contemporary art poses certain challenges to the field of aesthetics. To a greater extent, artworks from non-Western locations need to invoke certain imagery and tropes that are essential for the Western understanding of the society in question (cf. Clifford 1988). In the case of China, a kind of 'capitalist-communist hybrid propaganda' is emblematic for some of the most treasured artworks that have made their way into Western art institutions. There is an almost *required* appearance of an overt 'Chineseness' in order for these artworks to gain recognition: these often include notions of repression, recent trends of consumption and alienation, and control of family size (Stallabrass 2006: 39-43).

At the intersection between the local and the global art markets, communities such as Songzhuang are adapting to the institutional structure as well as the tenets of the international art world. This makes it pertinent to address Songzhuang in terms of the emerging institutions and the relation between various players in the field of art production and consumption. The consecration of artworks relies first and foremost

upon the prestige and knowledge of particular agents or institutions. It is this body of galleries, museums, auctions and biennales, plus the corps of various professionals that facilitate the emergence of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the 'pure gaze' (Bourdieu 1993: 36). This 'gaze' is related to the idea of the field of art working according to its own rules, criteria and values, unaffected by the external (whether political or economic) pressures and demands. However, as noted by Bourdieu:

It is all too obvious that critics also collaborate with the art trader in the effort of consecration which makes the reputation and, at least in the long term, the monetary value of works. 'Discovering' the 'new talents', they guide buyers' and sellers' choices by their writings or advice...and by their verdicts, which, though offered as purely aesthetic, entail significant economic effects (Bourdieu 1993: 78).

The *value* of artworks relies upon the different forms of capital (e.g., monetary, specialized knowledge, position in the established art world) that are invested in the artworks and the feedback mechanisms of particular agents in the art world. As to the 'economic effects' we see how a new line of professionals in contemporary Chinese art push the artworks of local artists into circulation on the Western art market, in turn creating a strong incentive to produce certain images to satisfy the taste and preferences of foreign art buyers.

Despite the proliferation of certain styles and the repetition of quasi-political imagery, not all artists follow the golden footsteps of others. Dazzled by the gloss of contemporary Chinese art, and infused with the hope of being successful provided by powerful investors and important gatekeepers, some artists move away from the trodden path of producing political commentaries. As Chinese contemporary art has gained increasing recognition during the last decade, new opportunities and forms of entrepreneurial activities have emerged. In recent years, a vast array of new possibilities for artists has emerged as art moves into new spheres of exchange and popular forms of consumption. This has created an unforeseen explosion of public forums for debating contemporary art from its financial to its aesthetic aspects, art consultancy groups, creative advisors, magazines, etc. Today, contemporary Chinese art slips into the city in new ways, fuses with the fields of fashion and design, and expresses itself in a new range of media, thus evolving from a state of mere repetition.

The Songzhuang Artist Community

As an artist community, Songzhuang was founded in 1994 when a few artists came there after they were evicted from the 'Old Summer Palace Artist Community' in Beijing. In recent years, the upsurge in the popularity of contemporary Chinese art has brought with it developments in infrastructure; there also have been some demographic changes due to ongoing migration into the community. From a birds-eye view, Songzhuang more resembles a node that gathers several smaller communities into a larger cluster. Located on the outskirts of Beijing, Songzhuang has become one of the largest art communities in the world. It is estimated that the community holds about 2,000 active artists among others related to the production of contemporary art.

Because of the less attractive location and not so *artsy* environment (there are few places for leisure consumption), Songzhuang has avoided the extreme rise in real estate prices, and with that, the tendency toward gentrification, as well as the business-like nature of the more prestigious and renowned 798 art district.² Although living expenses in Songzhuang are lower than in Beijing, only a few artists can subsist from selling their art alone. That is why most take up other occupations, such as unlicensed taxi driving, assisting more successful painters, running restaurants and retail shops or working as teachers. Obviously, the artists of Songzhuang enjoy a remarkable freedom to move in and out of the community.

Evidently a change in the official stance toward contemporary Chinese art has spurred new possibilities for artists. However, it is also important to bear in mind how the intensification of trade in contemporary art further provides the local authorities with noticeable economic benefits. The institutional circulation of artworks allows officials to collect revenue whenever paintings are sold (mostly at the larger exhibitions and auctions). Investors and artists state that the general tax level varies between 8 and 13 per cent, depending on the price of the painting. Investing noticeable means into developing Songzhuang as a site for 'national innovation', the local government not only reduces fiscal and administrative pressure on the artist population but, as will become evident in the following section, also invests considerably in the organization of larger art events, the construction of museums, new art spaces and studios for rent.

A City Built on Culture

With the renewed emphasis on creativity in official discourse, Songzhuang has been relabelled as one of the creative zones from where new ideas and products will emerge. Local governments across China are urged (also by economic incentives) to develop the infrastructure necessary for these zones to develop and prosper. In the case of Songzhuang, since 2005 culture officials have collaborated with local artists, critics and curators to stage the annual Songzhuang Culture and Arts Festival.

At the grand opening at the end of 2007, representatives from the local government and several higher-ranking cultural officials framed all of Songzhuang's artists' aspirations and the purpose of their artworks within an overtly nationalistic discourse. Massive billboards around the streets of Songzhuang stressed the rising importance of the Chinese cultural scene and the potential for national innovation. Below is an excerpt from one of the billboards erected for the festival:

The Culture & Arts festival of Songzhuang...is an international and influential pageant of culture and art. Instructed and organized by the People's Government of Beijing and Tongzhou District, the people of Songzhuang have put 'A Town Built on Culture' into practice.... The festival also deepens the accumulation of culture, strengthens sustainable development power and helps to make Songzhuang one of the cultural and art centres of the world. Songzhuang is not only a piece of countryside that has affected the development of China's art history, but also a field where world culture and art blend together. Furthermore, it is a participant and practitioner in the great course of revival for the Chinese nation. (Songzhuang Culture and Art Festival 8/11-2007 - 宋庄文化节组委会).

In Songzhuang, the local government is apt to adapt the cultural production to fulfil its own goals within a broader political agenda. Pairing 'sustainable development' with contemporary art endows art production with a set of moral qualities. In addition, we can note how 'A Town Built on Culture' is framed within a broader historical context of Chinese art history. This creates a sense of continuity, that is, to incorporate the heterogeneous manifestations of modern culture into the larger trajectory of the nation. The common goal, a 'revival of the Chinese nation', completely obscures the fact that until recently, the official stance toward avant-garde art was considerably more critical (e.g., Barmé 1999a; Lu 2001: 143).

The artists who came to Songzhuang in the 1990s explain how the local community in Songzhuang *now* is less suspicious of the newcom-

ers. According to many artists, the local government has, within the last five years or so, reduced pressure on the migrant artist population. The systematic enforcement of control mechanisms, such as the citizen registration system (户口), is less strict, enabling many newcomers to enter and participate in the activities and overall productivity of the community. The local government embraces the mass of migrating artists and has even set up a quasi-official Artist Reception Centre in Xiaopu Square, located in the heart of the Songzhuang Artist Community.

Negotiating Artistic Content

One might ask whether the reduced control with the migrating artist population is paralleled with a less strict enforcement of censorship. Attempting to provide a nuanced picture of enforced censorship, this section will suggest how the selection of artists, artworks, and the themes of exhibitions are subject to negotiations rather than strict enforcement of a hard-line party policy.

During the opening ceremony of the 2007 Songzhuang Culture and Arts Festival and in the following days there was a heavy presence of police and visible security measures. Obviously, the local authorities made an effort to prevent unexpected events and ensure a trouble-free festival. When asked what artistic content is likely to be censored, artists give rather ambiguous answers. They do not seem to know of any clear-cut criteria, and often they do not really take any great interest in the question of censorship. An interesting point, however, is that a few local performance artists were hindered in performing because of the 'inappropriate' nature of their performances. To give an example, a performance that was supposed to entail nudity and revolve around the topic of female sexuality, never took place. Several similar incidents had occurred during the two previous festivals.

A possible explanation for this might be that performance art interacts haphazardly with its surroundings and is thus more difficult to control. Still, the authorities have no chance of controlling the many events, which is the reason why most performance art takes place without prior announcement. It seems that the nature of performance art creates the need for greater supervision and is more likely to be obstructed. Another reason could be that performance art often takes place *outside* the institutional framework, and as opposed to tangible artworks, is more difficult to convert into a product, which leaves little opportunity for officials to collect revenue.

Despite the above-mentioned incidents, participating in the many formal and informal activities in Songzhuang, it is often difficult to distinguish between the official and unofficial, as many different agents take part in arranging shows, choosing artists and artworks and so on. Yet, the larger exhibitions are usually opened with a speech made by a cultural representative from the local government. The festival events that draw the broadest attention are those organized and monitored by a meshwork of local culture representatives, investors, galleries, curators, critics and art producers. These professional networks select artworks, settle on themes and locations and direct the events intended to capture the attention of cultural entrepreneurs and art devotees.

Prior to an exhibition, the curator responsible for the exhibitions will go through the artworks with local culture representatives to professionally screen the content. In general, the degree and execution of direct censorship seems fragmented, incomplete and sometimes more or less random. A few artists even state that the 'status' of an artist (i.e., basically the value of his or her artworks) is a factor to consider in relation to what becomes censored. Contrary to the strict policing of hard-line party decrees that specifically state what to allow and what not to allow, this appears more like a negotiation between official representatives, influential art critics in the community and the proprietor of the venue.

New Systems of Circulation: Contracts and Monopolies

The anthropologists Marilyn Strathern and Eric Hirsch posit: 'perhaps creativity is a special preoccupation of energy-consuming capitalism and thus an interested description of the connections between activities and outcomes' (Hirsch and Strathern 2004: 8). This proposition invites us to examine what emerging claims to 'outcomes' as well as artistic expressions reveal. In other words, when artworks and different styles turn into a powerful resource, who enjoys the benefits and who loses a foothold? To address this question it is relevant to assess how artworks circulate, how they are traded and essentially who controls and directs the *creativity* attributed to the production of contemporary art.

Until recently, Songzhuang artists sold from out of their studios or through people familiar to them. In this *mode* of production (and consumption), artworks would circulate outside the boundaries of galleries and museums and hence be less affected by the role of cultural brokers, institutions and the process of negotiation described above. This meant,

of course, that artists had to promote themselves but ultimately it gave them the power to determine the content of the artwork and furthermore to set the terms of the transaction. Although most artists still sell from their studios in Songzhuang, social relations between those agents relating to the production of artworks (i.e., artists, galleries, painting assistants, etc.) are increasingly mediated through professional contracts employed by new art institutions. In this process, informal relations become more formalized and subject to new claims.

Initially, there was practically no collaboration or interaction between artists and galleries. Now, the increased cash flow and level of investment is propelled by the institutional development of the gallery and auction industry. Opinions of contracts vary much within the community. Usually people working in galleries argue that contracts are less biased and thus create greater transparency as they are implemented in the realm of law. A general assumption in regard to professional relations, and to contracts in particular, is that breaking a contract will cause a standardized set of sanctions. However, despite several cases where contractual obligations were breached, either by galleries/investors or artists, there was no indication of any punitive sanctions. Many artists in Songzhuang agree that signed contracts are no more than a symbolic sign of the relationship, and that they merely emulate Western transactions so to create a false sense of professionalism and transparency.

Despite the fact that many contracts in Songzhuang are yet to be implemented into a legal framework, it seems that these formalized relations have other effects. A basic condition of contracts is that artists will be ensured a relatively stable income as the gallery/investor agrees to handle a certain number of paintings each year, invest in promoting the artist and enable participation in a number of exhibitions. This being said, contractual relations in Songzhuang also often imply that an artist will lose the right to dispose of his or her own artworks. In other words, the artist cannot set the price or even sell artworks without the consent of the gallery/investor. This applies to already existing artworks as well as future ones. Furthermore, many of the artworks produced after the introduction of these new professional relations have already been ordered or custom made (定做) and therefore have changed hands even before having materialized on the canvas.

For artists, contracts serve as a way to become recognized, but more importantly, to ensure their livelihoods. If Songzhuang artists wish to make a living from their art production (画画为生), they see little option

but to engage in these relations. Contracts appear to be the initiation of a social relation that entails a great deal of socializing, mutual claims and the exchange of material as well as contacts and information. On behalf of investors and galleries, contracting is a way to monopolize outcomes—a way to secure one's investment—not through legal and administrative protection, but through monetary and personal investment in social relations.

A Chinese Klondike

Zhao Zhenyan, an artist who first came to Songzhuang in the year 2000 explains that within the last few years, more than a thousand new artists have entered the community. He points to the 'financial market bubble' as the main reason for this development, drawing people to Songzhuang hoping to 'strike gold'. Although not everyone submits to such a gloomy outlook, still many refer to the current craze as similar to a 'gold rush' (挖金). For most artists (usually the ones that have been producing art for some time), it is with a slightly melancholic air that they recall the sense of social coherence in the earlier years of the Songzhuang community. One artist explains:

Artists nowadays are different from before, they resemble superstars most of all—all running around laughing [ironically referring to a poster lying on a table before us, showing a picture of the laughing face of Yue Minjun, one of the most successful Chinese contemporary artists]. They work more and more through social connections [搞关系], striving to achieve fame and enhance their social status. The ultimate goal is to sell their paintings (Zhao Zhenyan, personal communication, January 2008).

The iconic and ambivalent meaning that is attributed to the 'superstar' artists is proof that one can 'make it' in the growing sphere of contemporary arts. It appears, however, that artists' advancement increasingly relies upon their capacity to work 'through social connections', gaining recognition in the right circles.

It is not uncommon that artists' efforts to engage in this type of profit-oriented sociality result in a pragmatic *appropriation* of professional identity. Different agents (especially artists, curators and gallery managers) tend to present themselves differently according to the situational context. This also becomes evident through different types of written material (documents, business cards, biographies, sales records). Many use various sets of often meticulously designed business cards suitable for a variety of encounters, even designating different occupations.

Upward mobility increasingly relies on how skilfully artists manoeuvre through the field, how they present themselves and, especially in the case of contracts, who helps push their artworks in the right directions.

With the sense of a 'gold rush' and the new trajectories of Songzhuang artworks, there is a break with the collectivity and transparency among artists who used to share the same social conditions in relation to living standards, income (lack of), and the more general position as social pariahs. Artists explain how earlier everyone would live together in smaller groups, cook and eat together, exchange artworks with one another, and maybe most importantly, a few would actually be able to make a living from their production.

The popularity of contemporary Chinese art thus brings about a hierarchical differentiation and undermines the egalitarian values that artists remember as characteristic of the Songzhuang community only a few years ago. In other words, in the wake of this 'present bubble' responsible for the substantial migration of artists to the community, the social conditions vary much from artist to artist. The present atmosphere is characterized by commercialization, being 'market-oriented' (市场化). Unofficially, artists and other agents working within the art community tend to measure the quality (i.e., level of success) of specific artists according to the 'square-metre price' of their paintings, which usually is set through contractual relations.

Artworks are now comparable on an economic scale. The economic *appreciation* of artworks is paralleled with a demographic change in the community where artists that share the same level of recognition (i.e., income) group together in different areas of Songzhuang. These developments not only cause a change in the social stratification of artists but, as I will go on to argue, also affect how the artists themselves relate to their products; it even affects the artistic expressivity that emerges from the art communities.

The 'Dye Factory'

In Songzhuang one encounters a harsh critique of contemporary conditions. Despite the hype and international recognition of many of the artworks that emerge from the community, optimism is seldom the stance that artists express. The artist Zhao Zhenyan emphasizes how the heterogeneity of people who come to settle in the community brings new ways of thinking and artistic innovations, enriching the potential for the visual expression of Songzhuang. However, shortly after, he states:

Being in the community also has a big disadvantage. Now Songzhuang resembles an old dye factory most of all, where everything that enters it becomes mixed together, and eventually ends up being the same colour as the rest (Zhao Zhenyan, personal communication, January 2008).

By making an analogy to the old (standardized) production of textiles in China, this artist points out a trend widely discussed in the community. A few informants even refer to this as the 'tragedy of Songzhuang', revealing the tendency of artists to adhere to the same style and artistic expressions. The implicit reference to factory production raises several important points: first, that personal experience and expression seem to flatten out when people enter the community, everything becomes 'the same colour as the rest'. Second, invoking the picture of a factory creates a similarity with large-scale production like that of Dafen³ in Shenzhen, where painting is only oriented towards the market, and copies and imitations are produced on demand.

Imitation is opposed to the contentions of a Western art discourse that suggests good art must originate from the creative individual, who through intellect and imagination brings new forms into life (Morphy and Perkins 2006: 2). Artworks are characterized by 'individuality, singularity and novelty', which suggests that imitation cannot be creative (Nakamura 2007: 80). The negative analogy of a dye factory undermines the ambitions of an art community, often positioned as avant-garde and opposed to other more established and mainstream sites for art production (and consumption).

Local expressions such as the 'dye factory' imply that the common way to conceptualize creativity is in relation to the criteria of an international art world with its implicit emphasis on originality and individuality as a guarantor for authenticity. It seems that the strong emphasis on originality somehow correlates with an emerging interest in the issue of plagiarism and *theft* of ideas, a topic that currently occupies most artists in the community.

'Shortcuts' to Recognition

Although there are many nuances in practices of artistic imitation, an expression that is now commonly used to describe this phenomenon is plagiarism (剽窃), which, with the relatively short history of intellectual property rights in China, bears witness to a new way to conceptualize the relationship between the artistic practices and the prospects of economic gains for the individual artist.

Examining Chinese creativity we encounter a paradox: that clearly, Chinese contemporary and avant-garde art is increasingly valued in prominent art institutions around the world while, on the other hand, China is often perceived as a nation based on imitation and tradition (e.g., Puett 2001). In Songzhuang, one encounters a whole range of different expressions with which to describe the act of imitation. Some have positive connotations with the emphasis on imitation as a way of learning (临摹), while others inform us that 'plagiarizing' is negative; the latter is mostly used when artists complain about losing a profit as a consequence of what they would refer to as 'stealing ideas'. Many artists from the community complain about the ubiquitous problem of copying among practitioners, worrying that even friends will steal their ideas, styles and techniques. Nevertheless, from my interviews, but especially during informal conversations, I sense a pragmatic attitude toward imitation and the re-reproduction of certain styles and images. Lao Chen, an experienced artist in his mid-fifties explains:

In China, artists' social conditions are not very good. There is no other safeguard. To copy successful artists is quite common. In this way, through *standing in the light* of famous artists [沾光], they hope to sell a little better. This is a means to subsist, a means to gain some kind of advantage. This is a time where this trend is widespread (Lao Chen, personal communication, February 2008).

Being an artist in contemporary China does not include any kind of standardized economic foundation. This is an important reason why artists tend to decipher the trends in the global art market to make ends meet. The expression 'standing in the light of others' (沾光) implies profiting at other artists' expense through establishing an obvious resemblance to a certain style or content. In this case, this trend refers to artists who imitate the expressivity of more successful artists and their styles.

One of the most recognized styles of Chinese contemporary art (and in particular Songzhuang art) is 'political pop' (政治波谱). A characteristic of this style is the juxtaposition of icons of capitalism and consumer society with old socialist imagery in bizarre and often critical ways. 'Political pop' uses these vivid, colourful and contradictory images to ridicule official ideology, but also the commercialization of Chinese society.

Contrary to the apparent political critique commonly assigned to these artworks, most artists (under informal circumstances) at present interpret the many political images as a contemporary trend, a crude necessity to make a living. A Song, an artist in her late thirties explains:

When somebody paints a political type of painting it is often to take a shortcut. In other words, to take a shortcut is using the shortest way to reach your goal. ... This is about attracting the attention of other people. Much is dependent on the most important art collectors and the topics they are interested in. It's much about using familiar expressions, for example the famous political styles (A Song, personal communication, November 2007).

'To take a shortcut' (走捷径) is a popular idiom many artists (both in and outside Songzhuang) use to describe the appropriation of political images: how artists, instead of experimenting with the less familiar, are prone to produce political and stereotypical images. Stereotypes and tropes harden into rigid frameworks for future creations, defining what an individual artist might and might not be able to express or convey. Through the 'shortcuts', clear allusions to Chinese culture and history are made to invoke certain tropes and thus create recognizability. Consequently, the artworks not only become comprehensible but also valuable (Clifford 1988: 227-228; Stallabrass 2006: 37).

Another important aspect to consider here is the economic incentive for artists to produce critical political imagery as a kind of 'packaged dissent' (Barmé 1999a: 179). Bringing his critical take on popular culture into the broader field of contemporary art, Barmé draws on the philosopher of art, Arthur C. Danto, who posits:

An awful lot of what was introduced in a kind of anti-establishment spirit has—such is the irony of things—found its way into the highest precincts of contemporary high art, as if cooperation was irresistible, and the art world, like the commercial world, feeds and flourishes on what was intended to call it in question and overthrow it (quoted in Barmé 1999b: 17).

Danto's proposition invites us to observe the dialectical relation between avant-garde and mainstream, and consequently, how expressions of dissent dissolve as they are absorbed into and circulated within the institutions of a Western art market.

Imitation in the Market

Artists seem to reside in a kind of helpless condition, compelled to go and do things they do not like, or paint something that one does not like to paint, repeatedly imitating one's own works because the market demands it (Lao Chen, personal communication, February 2008).

Artist Lao Chen points to an interesting phenomenon: how artists are compelled to create large series in the same style 'imitating one's own works', almost as a sort of commercial *branding* of mass-produced

commodities. When gallery managers and artists explain how to draw the attention of art collectors, they often emulate the strategies of commercial branding and marketing; the term 'promote works' (推动艺术) was applied when referring to activities of making a name and drawing attention to oneself. But even expressions such as branding (oneself) (品牌建设) or especially the general importance of having a particular symbol (i.e., virtually a brand) (符号) are common in Songzhuang. A 'symbol' is a legitimate trait that links an artist to a specific style.

The modern preoccupation with authenticity compels artists to distinguish themselves through recognizable signs, distinguishing themselves from the works of others and establishing a style that is easily recognized. The tendency for artists to create extensive series as well as large 'orders' of artworks by the new patrons of contemporary art compels many artists to employ one or more 'assisting painters' (助手). Some artists even employ professional 'sharpshooters' (枪手), a group of skilled imitators who quickly can adapt to the styles and expressions of the artists who employ them.

This can be perceived as a further exploration into the artist's ideas and traits, but essentially, as Lao Chen argues above, an artist (and his co-creators) easily end up mass-producing homogenous paintings on the same theme (often in varying sizes and colours). Paradoxically, and maybe even augmented by the emerging professional contracts, this intensifies the conflict between the ideological preferences of the international art world that prefers artists to be independent and the actual conditions where artists are urged to duplicate their own works to satisfy the demands of their patrons.

This supports a surprising insight that I absorbed from my many conversations in Songzhuang: that the continuous contact with colleagues, galleries and art investors actually helped enforce a kind of conformity of the artworks, which also provides a plausible explanation for Zhenyan's dye factory analogy. Taking this under consideration, it does not seem valid to reduce the trends of imitation to solely a product of Chinese art history or culturalistic explanations that depict the Chinese as opportunistic *copyists*. Rather we must assess how imitation occurs as a structural consequence of the introduction of a Western art market (including more explicit institutional structures, new professionals, standardized contracts, etc.).

The production of series, as well as the emphasis attributed to the importance of having a personal symbol (indeed a Chinese one), and in turn making this symbol recognizable in the market, suggests that

the premise of art production has changed. A new, more collaborative mode of production is emerging: a mode where middlemen, galleries and cultural entrepreneurs play a greater role in conveying new demands to artworks.

Markets and Artistic Expressivity

The market that initially developed in Songzhuang resembled a type of small town or peasant market, at times even working as a barter system, allowing each individual agent to appropriate, innovate and direct his or her personal resources and products. The later system, that of contractual relations and large-scale production, is more akin to what can be referred to as 'antimarkets' (De Landa 2000: 32). Antimarkets rely on the manipulation of supply and demand, planned extraction of surpluses. Antimarkets emerge when not only resources (as in individual ideas), but also rights to ownership change hands, in turn, amounting to a mode of production directed by enforceable contracts and corporate monopolies (De Landa 2000: 39, 48, 288).

The 'antimarket' is slowly becoming the institutional norm in communities such as Songzhuang instituting a new code of conduct (although contracts are still less viable in relation to legal claims). Evidently the transformation from markets (in the sense of a flexible and organically developed structure) to the oligopolistic nature of antimarkets affects several changes in the production of artworks. First, there is a general quantitative increase in the number of artworks produced as many artists hire assistant painters to meet the demands of galleries and investors. Second, the changes are also of a qualitative nature as the artists increasingly are prone to (re)produce certain styles to become recognizable in the market. This becomes evident with the proliferation of pseudo-subversive art that is so highly appreciated in Western art institutions.

In Songzhuang it has become increasingly common to see artists absorbed into larger entities that venture out into the promising industry of art production. Resourceful investors usually run these entities or conglomerates. The managers will interconnect or institute a dispersed network of critics, curators, artists, public relations managers and painting assistants, and interact with different levels of officials. Galleries and investors promote the artists they represent or, put more harshly, 'monopolize', through independent art magazines that they sometimes own and manage themselves. It is not uncommon to see how the new

patrons of contemporary Chinese art have transferred their funds from other fields of industry. Without much experience in the cultural field, these new patrons thus apply strategies from other spheres of exchange into the field of art. Even the strategies of artists themselves indicate that the business logic of promotion, branding and the trends of the international art world are increasingly internalized as the natural order of things in Songzhuang.

The ongoing processes of professionalization and standardization of Songzhuang impose a new set of criteria to measure artistic value in the community. Corporate and hierarchical structures replace informal relations; middlemen and cultural entrepreneurs bring the larger trends of the art world into Songzhuang in terms of promotion, appreciation and distribution.

From an intra-communal view little innovation takes place in Songzhuang. Given the negative outlook of artists in the community, the commercialization and new market-oriented trends of art production has left its mark on the expressivity in the community. However, when we consider the success story of contemporary Chinese art and the unprecedented speed with which Chinese artworks have entered the most exclusive institutions of contemporary art, it is difficult not to ascribe an element of innovation to the way these communities have excelled in *producing* artistic value.

Concluding Remarks

A common approach to treat cultural production in China is to enhance the heroic struggle of (creative) individuals opposing the hegemonic power of the state (Kraus 2004: 2; Hou 2002: 24, 25). Contrary to this perspective, a central point of this article has been to illustrate how there is a novel base for collaboration. This base tends to serve the interests of the state and commercial interests, as well as provide economic opportunities for the artists of Songzhuang. In other words, it is not the single artist working (independently) against the state, but an entire collective system, including artists, painting assistants, contracts, patronage, markets, and even state officials that characterizes and drives Chinese art today.

To launch Songzhuang as a cradle of innovation and creativity, where 'world culture and art blend together', the local authorities do not prevent newcomers from entering Songzhuang. Artistic creativity is apotheosized as the new, shining brand of the community, clearly

suggesting how the aspirations of the local government are projected onto the cultural sphere. Songzhuang's prosperity is closely tied to the development and potential of the art industry with its capacity to create new job opportunities and attract entrepreneurs and artists from every corner of the country (and even a few internationally).

The case of Songzhuang suggests that the growing artist communities, even those not located at artsy and exclusive venues across the major cities, are nevertheless affected by the taste and trends of international art buyers. Elaborating on the economic incentives for producing counter-culture (referred to by artists as taking 'shortcuts'), this article has shown how the appreciation and hype of contemporary Chinese art conditions a redundancy of similar artistic expressions, echoing earlier works by famous artists, often invoking certain political images and tropes.

To understand the present *modus operandi* of contemporary art in China it is important to encompass the immense effect of the influential gatekeepers of the Chinese art world: with their particular knowledge and position these gatekeepers not only affect the way artists manoeuvre through large-scale art markets, but, providing the gloss and hope for artists to access international markets, these gatekeepers also influence the field of contemporary Chinese art in terms of the artistic expressivity that comes out from these communities.

On a broader level it can be argued that the case of Songzhuang might be symptomatic of developments that are taking place on the whole scene for contemporary art as an example of the homogenizing effect of the transnational art system. This is particularly clear when we consider institutions of patronage, trends of investment and teams of assisting painters employed by superstar artists in their almost industrial scale of art production. Art historian Julian Stallabrass observes:

Corporate culture has thoroughly assimilated the discourse of a tamed postmodernism. As in mass culture, art's very lack of convention has become entirely conventional. Ubiquitous and insistent voices urge consumers to express themselves, be creative, be different, break the rules, stand out from the crowd, even rebel, but these are no longer the words of radical agitators but of business (Stallabrass 2006: 53).

Numerous examples illustrate well how contemporary art merges with corporate and multinational enterprises such as Chivas Regal, Nokia, Nike and C&A Fashion, who have efficiently managed to appropriate artists and their products to the purpose of advertisements (Sinha 2008: 84, 85). This is instructive of the way in which 'avant-garde' artists are fused into mainstream commercial production: corporate enterprises

contend for the power to fuse the creativity and aura of contemporary art with the respective goals of the particular patron.

The merging of art with commercial interests evidently carries art into another level of public influence. The strong upsurge in the popularity and wider recognition of these artworks create new possibilities for artists to develop more grand projects. Nevertheless the merging of business and art also directly exposes artists to the conjunctions of the global economy, lately best illustrated by the recession that continues to affect economies around the world.

On my latest visit to Songzhuang Artist Community in 2009, the effects of the recession were evident: many new buildings and construction sites were left vacant, raised as great question marks, waiting for another 'gold rush' to blow life into these void spaces. A young man from the Shandong province who makes his living by manufacturing frames and canvasses for artists remarked: 'everybody feels the recession, when there is no demand for artworks, artists don't paint as much. Then there is little need for my services'. Then again, not everybody finds this development disagreeable; some even argue that the quality of artworks might benefit from an ambience less influenced by the 'gold rush'. A few artists embrace the recession, as they trust a decline in the commercial interests of cultural entrepreneurs might set a more natural pace for art production in the community.

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NOTES

1. One performance drew special attention. A few hours after the opening, Xiao Lu (a participating artist) fired two live rounds into her own image reflected by a mirror in her art installation: a set of phone booths. These bore the inscription 'Dialogue'. Shortly after, the police shut down the exposition (Kraus 2004: 133).
2. The 798 art district is one the most renowned districts for contemporary art in China. However, the recent trends of commercialization of the Chinese art scene have changed 798 from being a place for production to a place for consumption. The popularity and rising rents of studio space have forced many artists to change location. Many have moved to Songzhuang. However, both artists and development planners point out that if the Chinese contemporary art craze continues and transforms the Songzhuang community into a more expensive and fashionable area, most of the artists will once again be forced to move in search of cheaper accommodation.

3. Dafen is basically factory production where one can order (also online) renditions of popular/classical artworks (changing maybe size or colour according to one's wishes). In Dafen there are approximately 6,000 artists, all of whom work in the factories.

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