

798: the re-evaluation of Beijing's industrial heritage in the



As testified by a UNESCO report on the Asia-Pacific region,¹ the preservation of industrial heritage in Asia is still at an early stage of application, and constitutes a controversial topic for many countries belonging to this region. The report makes the comparison with European countries' conservation practices and their relationship with their industrial past. Indeed, European countries have a common history of industrialisation that proceeded at a relatively homogenous pace. Moreover, industrialisation is now a relatively pleasant memory because the technological advancements it brought about have made many countries – the UK, for example – very proud of their industrial past and willing to considerate it part of their national heritage. For the countries included by UNESCO in the Asia-Pacific region,² however, this is not always the case.

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IN MANY COUNTRIES OF THIS AREA, industrialisation is still an ongoing process, often the outcome of a colonial domain, and presents many dark sides, such as pollution, environmental degradation and labour exploitation. Countries that have only recently achieved a high level of industrialisation, consider it too recent to be worth preserving. In fact, the World Heritage List counts only two industrial heritage sites in the whole Asia-Pacific region.³ However, this does not mean that industrial heritage has been completely disregarded or abandoned in Asia. On the contrary, there are several stimulating instances of preservation of these kinds of structures; among them is a current trend that falls outside the heritage dominion into the dominion of cultural policies and urban redevelopments. The 798 Dashanzi Factory in Beijing is among the best examples of this trend.

Urban redevelopment

Considered among China's largest hubs for the exhibition and commercialisation of contemporary art (covering approximately 1.300 square kilometres), the 798 Dashanzi Factory (originally named 718) was founded in the 1950s in the district of Chaoyang (North-East Beijing) to produce electronic components for the military. At the end of the 1980s it was gradually dismantled as a consequence of the wave of deindustrialisation that followed Deng Xiaoping's reform period. At a stage of semi-abandonment, towards the end of the 1990s, the government-appointed owners of the factory, the Seven Stars Group (SSG), decided to rent out the empty spaces in order to collect money to pay the laid-off workers' pensions. Coincidentally, the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing was looking for large spaces to rent in order to hold sculpture workshops; the factory caught the CAFA's attention, not only because of the large space and low prices, but also because of the aesthetic value of the abandoned factory buildings. After the CAFA later left to its new official location, it was replaced by an impressive number of artists who decided to install their studios there, and who formed an artist village.

The industrial complex, which had formerly been split into smaller and more manageable units, now saw the merging of five of its six establishments under the name Seven Stars Science and Technology Co. Ltd. (also Seven Stars Group - SSG), one of the first high-tech companies in Beijing. In this context a greater role was being given by the government to financial institutions, real-estate developers and individuals. In Beijing, a new ring of buildings developed by this wave of urban redevelopment came to be added to existing assets that followed a concentric pattern around the city centre; from pre-1949 traditional buildings to socialist buildings developed by the Maoist government. Although redevelopment of dilapidated neighbourhoods and rural land for housing and business, on the one hand meant that people could improve their living conditions, on the other it also limited their improvement, because after redevelopment house prices were raised and, as the process of gentrification generally implies, parts of the population (mainly the lower classes) were pushed to the outskirts of the city due to financial constraints. As a consequence, the process of urban redevelopment has mostly facilitated the upper-middle classes in the purchasing of housing.

Effectively, after a few years of artistic activities, the SSG, a state-owned enterprise, had a plan approved by the city government to turn this area into a "heaven for new technology and commerce" – the Zhongguacun Electronics Park – by 2005,⁴ and to develop the rest of the land into high-rise modern apartments.⁵ This project would reflect the 'old glories' of the factory. As a consequence, the owners decided to evict the artists because the plans involved destroying the old buildings. Outraged by the threats of eviction and joining an emerging social concern in China against the demolition of ancient structures disguised as urban renewal, the artists, who believed the buildings had an immense historical and architectural value, started protesting in favour of the preservation of the 798 and the maintenance of the artist village as its occupying community. The artist community, which involved local artists but also external activists who protested against the government's architectural heritage destruction, formed an 'art advocacy group' called Thinking Hands (*sixiang shou*), which aimed at raising awareness of the area's potential destruction and promoted its dedication as a place for art expression.

Protest

One of the main reasons for the activism behind 798 was to impede the destruction of such an important historical site, for its cultural and symbolic value in Chinese recent history. As one of their first protest acts, the artist community established an International Dashanzi Art Festival. Subsequently, a book titled *Beijing 798*, edited by Huang Rui and Robert Barnell⁶ – members of the community as well as activists committed to the 798 cause – was published to stress the importance of the area's architecture, history and artistic production. A counter-offensive was presented by the Seven Stars group in 2004 when, together with the local government, they realised that the protest might become a serious obstacle for their urban development plans. They started increasing rental prices and renting the venues to new tenants, to foreigners and to cultural-related organisations, in order to hinder the activities within the artist village. A year later, in a final attempt to protect the art villagers from eviction and to save the buildings from demolition, the local artists' organisation supported by Li Xiangqun, a local sculptor and Tsinghua University professor elected to the People's Congress in 2004, filed a proposal to the local government to turn 798 into an art district. The crucial element that helped them in attaining their goal and preserving the 798 was the introduction, in the same period, of 'creative industries' policies.

Creative industries

When China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, its administration of culture came to involve the idea of 'creativity as a source of innovation'. Scholars and important official figures, such as Li Wuwei,⁷ became inspired by the 'creative industries' policies, promoted in 1998 by the British Department for Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) at the end of the 1990s, and praised them as emblems of the new 'creative' path China was undertaking. Michael Keane stated that China has a 'creative complex' – compared to

adoption of creative industries policies

other countries – because of its manufacturing role in the global markets and that the adoption of creative industries in China might be a consequence of this and a way to achieve the same innovation levels as other leading global powers.⁸ Indeed, this strategy takes inspiration from John Howkins' theory of 'the creative economy',⁹ which sees intellectual property as an element on which countries can capitalise and base their development strategies. His theory is complemented by Michael Porter's theories concerning the idea of 'clustering' – intended as a spatial agglomeration of firms doing business in compatible fields, as a competitive strategy for concentrating and improving creation of wealth in specific areas¹⁰ – and the ideas of Richard Florida with regards to the 'creative city', assuming that currently there is a tendency that can be observed in the 'creative sector' of clustering in cities that favour the three Ts (talent, technology and tolerance).¹¹ This issue of 'clustering' has been widely debated among scholars who dismiss its assumptions as a neoliberalist way of dealing with the issue of creativity in relation to cultural policy and economic development¹² and of facilitating the gentrification of degraded urban areas and neighbourhoods.^{13,14}

In ideological terms, these policies were aimed at reversing the image of China as a manufacturing country, one that imported ideas and 'copied' from the West, into a producer of innovation and lifestyle. In practical terms, the promotion of the creative industries also involved benefits such as a tax reduction of 15-20%, residence subsidies for talents up to 20% and free advertisement for those who embraced them. By the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen had already embraced the creative industries as a local development strategy and in Beijing there were already ten established creative clusters.¹⁵ Moreover, this project was involved in administrative plans for urban redevelopments scheduled in view of the 2008 Olympics, and has been strongly endorsed and advertised by the government. In 2008 these clusters' revenue accounted for 10% of Beijing's internal GDP.¹⁶

798 Art Zone

The adoption of the label '798 Dashanzi Art Zone' happened in 2005, and coincided with the Beijing municipal government's recognition of the area as 'a modern heritage'.¹⁷ Finally, in 2011, the local government established an institution "for the strategic planning and preservation of 798 as a national hub of contemporary arts",¹⁸ which downsized the role of administrative intervention to daily management, but ultimately shifted most of the power into the hands of the local government. This meant that the local community no longer had a voice in the decision-making. Thus, the institutionalisation of creative industries became a crucial element for the government to regulate the new paths of culture in 798, but at the same time guaranteed the role of the CCP in directing them.

On the one hand, the loss of the art community through gentrification, meant a dramatic loss of appeal of the 798 as an underground environment, which is clearly reflected by the adoption of the term 'Art Zone', replacing 'artist village'. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the government's plan to economically develop the area proved effective, since not only did 798 become a symbol of well-functioning creative industry, increasing the local economy, but the institutionalisation of 798 as a creative industry also allowed for the maintenance of its structures, which remain stable and in good order. Indeed, most of the original members of the artist community left the village or were indirectly evicted by rising rents. Nevertheless, many members also benefited from the development process: they became well-known, were provided a larger pool to whom they can show their works, and made a sufficient amount of money to



A sculpture by Liu Bolin, titled 'Fist', standing in one of the alleys of the current Art Zone.

keep their studios as showrooms in 798. Those artists who were deeply outraged by the commercialised track undertaken, did not return after its officialisation, and have now moved to other, lesser known, artist villages and keep producing their works there.

For centuries, China has experienced a dynastic history of systematically destroying the remains of previous generations: a Maoist period that demolished most ancient structures to achieve its industrial dream; or the contemporary socialist-capitalist period, in which technological advancement and economic development has supplanted all regards for urban conservation. In addition, the urban population of China holds many contrasting opinions with regards to their industrial heritage. To conclude, despite the regretfully negative outcome for many of the original members of the 798 art community (before its officialisation), and without sharing the theoretical assumptions of the creative industries as a whole, I do believe that the 'creative industries' discourse has been cleverly appropriated by the original grassroots movement and has been instrumental in preserving the 798 buildings and avoiding their demolition.

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- 6 Robert Barnell was the first foreign occupant of the 798.
- 7 Li Wuwei is Vice-Chairperson of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and Vice-Chairperson of the Central Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang Revolutionary Committee, President of the Shanghai Creative Industries Association and Director of the Research Centre for Creative Industries at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (RCCI SASS). He was and remains the principal architect and proponent of this idea in China.
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Left: An exhibition hall within 798 Dashanzi Art Zone's main building.

All photos: courtesy Virginia Fontanelli, July 2010.