

The Beijing 798 Art Zone: A Maturing Creative Cluster?

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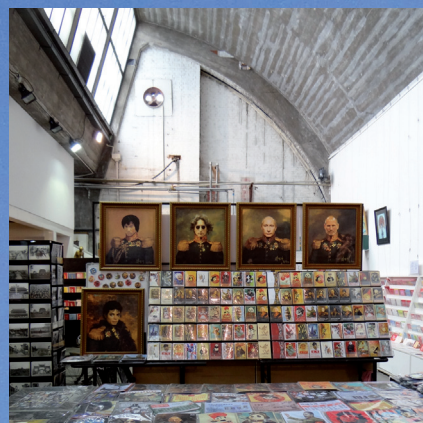
The Beijing 798 Art Zone (北京798艺术区) is certainly the most famous cultural district within China. It is located on a spacious factory site of a former military-industrial project from the 1950s. At that time, it was realized with the support of architects from East Germany, who were responsible for designing many buildings in Bauhaus style.

Already during the late 1990s, avant-garde Chinese artists and designers started to move into the mostly derelict area. The site soon became the blossoming epicenter of contemporary art in China. It was finally saved from bulldozing before the Beijing Olympic Games and has turned into a popular urban leisure area not only for the emerging bourgeois bohemians (Bobos), but also for an increasing amount of international tourists. As a pioneering art zone it became a role model for the development and management of many other creative spaces in China.



Entry Gate of Beijing 798 Art Zone





In 2012, China displaced the U.S. as the leading market for fine arts by sales value. Just one decade ago, many of the now internationally renowned Chinese artists moved into an abandoned factory complex in the northern suburbs of Beijing. The site had formerly served as a military factory, constructed and developed by China's socialist brother countries East-Germany and the Soviet Union. The pioneers rented cheap workshops and were only tolerated by the local government at that time.

During the following years, revalorisation of the industrial buildings began on a bigger scale. Already in 2003, six galleries had been established, subsequently the district witnessed a phase of consolidation. Global media coverage promoted public attention of the "798" area, which soon gained an unique reputation as *the* hotspot for modern Chinese arts. Nonetheless, speculation of property developer companies and state fear of potentially critical artists threatened the district in its very existence – indeed, many art villages around Beijing had already been demolished before.

International attention even increased when Beijing prepared for the Olympic Games: As a consequence, the municipal government officially recognized the 798 district as a creative and cultural cluster in 2006. This led to a booming development. A Belgian couple opened the biggest non-profit place for contemporary Chinese arts, the UCCA gallery. In 2008, already 150 galleries could be found within the area. But this also put pressure on individual artists, who were not able to afford the rising rents anymore. Consequently, many of them were forced to move out. In spring 2012, gallery managers complained to the authors that the number of people interested in buying original art has dramatically decreased during the past years. In contrast, the number of people just wanting to experience the site as leisure area has surged. Also, the district has become a popular spot for shooting wedding photos. Recently, 798 served as a fancy stage for big commercial events such as the China Fashion Week or an Armani fashion show.

Meanwhile, the local government of Beijing has embraced the 798

Art Zone as integral part of its city branding. It is a vivid symbol of the success of the so-called "Second Transition", the overall strive to restructure the economy from the "factory of the world" towards more value-added production and services based on domestic innovation. In that way, "Made in China" is meant to become "Created in China". It shall represent creativity and is standing for the presumably vast reservoir of talents, in a wider sense also for tolerance. However, the latter has apparently strict limits as the ongoing controversy around Ai Weiwei is showing.

Nowadays, the 798 Art Zone can be labeled as maturing creative cluster. The initial phase of bottom-up development has been succeeded by a phase of consolidation. Its maturing character can be traced back to its complete passage of a gentrification cycle. This went along with a massive commercialization of the whole area into a hotspot for urban entertainment. Individual artists have increasingly been displaced by galleries, presenting Chinese fine arts to the global arts scene.

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