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# 'In-Progress Reporting: Development of China's Creative Economy Through Participatory Design Research in Post-Industrial Regeneration'

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This paper reports on work-in-progress as part of a project funded in October 2018 by the U.K. Arts and Humanities Research Council and Newton Fund. It details the project's early activities following the establishment of a multi-disciplinary research network of British and Chinese academics pursuing research through engaging with cultural organisations, commercial stakeholders and other constituent groups in Europe and China. The investigation focuses on generating alternative strategies for sustainable urban renewal of China's post-industrial areas. In the search for new drivers of growth, China is moving from a model of expansion, to one of revitalising its urban areas. This is as a result of the Chinese government's recognition of the increasing importance of the creative industries in China in stimulating the country's future economic growth. Since October 2018 the UK-China research team have worked on preliminary research activities that will become the foundation for the later stages of the project. The research has focused on the three Chinese cities of Shenyang, Dalian, and Wushan. Each of these areas offers particular histories, social demographics, economic characteristics, and cultural identities that afford different opportunities for regeneration through a diversity of creative economy activities. Post-industrial sites within each area have been identified for potential re-generation and provide a focus for the investigations in each location. Although the project is still in its early stages, this paper defines the context for the project and documents the initial findings.

***Keywords: China; Post-Industrial; Regeneration; Creative Economy; Participatory Design Research***

## 1 Introduction

Post-industrial sites in Chinese cities are being redeveloped as catalysts for the regeneration of urban areas, as the Chinese economy moves to an innovation-driven, and wealth-creation phase of its development. Examples such as Beijing's 798 Art Zone and 751 Design-Park are exemplars of this (see figures 1&2). However, the success of these projects in driving the development of China's creative economy has led to a number of copy-cat redevelopment projects,

duplicating the format of industrial zones and cultural parks in cities around the country. While these urban renewal projects are ambitious in seeking to foster China's next stage of economic growth, they often fail to respond to the different contexts of each location. Understanding that regeneration is beyond bricks and mortar, and pertains to an area's physical, social, and economic well-being (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003), is particularly pertinent for the sustained development of local creative economies, where an understanding of local skills, trading histories, cultural heritage, and the social narratives that bind community identity, can help to deliver effective regeneration strategies.



Figure 1 and 2; Beijing's 798 Art Zone and 751 Design-Park, Source: Jon Spruce

In responding to these issues, a multi-disciplinary partnership of UK & Chinese academics and practitioners was established. The partner institutions include: The Public Art Centre of China National Academy of Paint (CNAP); Luxun Academy of Fine Arts (LAFA); Dalian Polytechnic University (DPU); Liverpool John Moores University (JLMU) and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Funding was gained for a three-year research project through the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) & Newton Fund in October 2018 entitled 'Developing the Creative Economy in China.' (Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2019) Specifically, this project aims to investigate alternative strategies for sustainable urban renewal of China's in post-industrial areas, pursuing research activities through engagement with cultural organisations, commercial stakeholders, and other constituent groups in both Europe and China. In the search for new drivers of growth, China is moving from a model of expansion, to one of revitalising its urban areas. As western economies have expanded from manufacturing-based to service-orientated sectors, so the creative industries in China become increasingly important in stimulating its future economic growth.

The research project focuses attention on the three Chinese cities of Shenyang, Dalian, and Wushan. Each of the areas offers particular histories, social demographics, economic characteristics, and cultural identities, affording different opportunities for regeneration through a diversity of creative economy activities. Post-

industrial sites within each city, currently earmarked for potential re-generation have been identified by the research partners, providing a focus for the investigations in each location. The project will enable the joint research team to obtain a broad and diverse understanding of urbanisation and spatial regeneration issues, representing different forms of urban structure, industry and culture, due to geographical location, local economies and regional institutional support.

The three locations of Shenyang, Dalian and Wushan are replete with decommissioned and abandoned factories and warehouses due to the changing contexts in which they operate. Various political, ideological and conceptual factors have led to these changing contexts, such as: the changes in China as it has moved from a Maoist regime towards participation in the free market economy; the growing focus on developing digital technologies rather than more traditional 'hard industries' has altered the needs of industry; greater global concern for the environment, and for fostering individual consciousness and creativity.

A key innovation in the project is the use of the participatory approaches and methodologies to generate new knowledge and insight. Through identifying local cultures and social narratives that prevail in the three locations within the cities of Dalian, Shenyang and Wushan, a programme of participatory activities that incorporate novel, context-rich research methods, for example, 'walking interviews', are being conducted. These, along with a series of inclusive stakeholder workshops, will generate strategies in response to the needs and ambitions of particular sites. For example, a case study with complex needs is the regeneration of the huge decommissioned cement factory in Wushan (see figure 3). The workshops and interviews will inform urban renewal strategies at a local level, through the development of spatial concepts that target the regeneration of such specific sites.

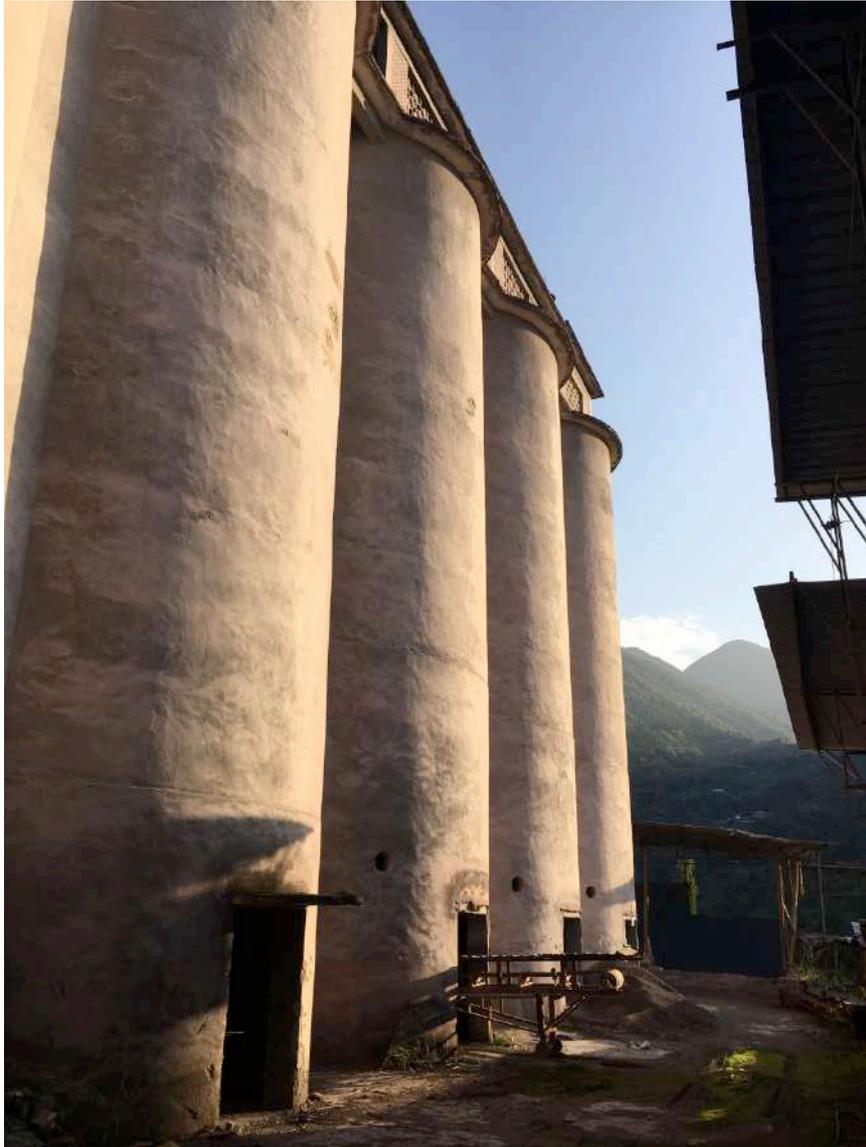


Figure 3: Wushan's Decommissioned Cement Factory Site, Source: Jon Spruce

This project does not just propose solutions for future designs but it analyses how extant sites should be remodelled and repurposed for the needs of current society. The project applies design research to generate socially inclusive insights, informing the critical understandings of identity and culture within urban regeneration strategies, deepening understanding of the social and cultural capital of a region, city or place, affording the opportunity for future interventions to enhance existing notions of social value.

## **2 Research Context**

The Chinese economy is slowing down after years of rapid development. Since 2011, more than half of the Chinese population have been living in cities. Urbanisation is making China wealthy, however is it sustainable? (The Atlantic, 2013). Porter's (1998) theory, that China was shifting from a factor-driven and investment-driven phase to the innovation-driven and wealth-creation phases of

economic development is now being realised. Problems such as imbalance between urbanization of land and urbanization of population have arisen (Di, 2013), with the layout of the urban development and regional infrastructures demonstrating a shortage of comprehensive coordination (Zhang, 2012). This provides an opportunity for the development of creative ecologies that can both drive economic growth and respond to the increasing social welfare issues arising from mass-urbanisation of many Chinese cities over the past three and a half decades. In this new context of innovation driven wealth-creation, creative problem-solving approaches such as 'design thinking' will have an increasingly significant role in informing economic development, in both the creative and non-creative industry sectors. In the search for new drivers of growth, China now moves from a model of expansion, to one of revitalising its urban areas.

Post-industrial sites in Chinese cities are being redeveloped as catalysts for the regeneration of urban areas. Examples such as the aforementioned Beijing's 798 Art Zone and 751 D-Park are exemplars of this strategy, tuning into the creative cultures of these cities to provide platforms for creative enterprises to flourish. (Jenkins, 2008) The success of these projects in driving the development of China's creative economy has led to a number of imitative redevelopment projects, creating a blueprint for the format of industrial zones and cultural parks in cities around the country. These newer projects are not always successful or adhere to the moral urges behind the predecessors. As Wang and Li state (2009): "Once the link between artists and archaic industrial buildings is underscored and legitimized, the resulting space becomes commercialized and, to an extent, discriminatory. The transformation of a place may generate economic returns, but in the process, it results in gentrification and social exclusion." (Wang and Li, 2009, p.884) Indeed, while many urban renewal projects are ambitious in seeking to foster economic growth, they often fail to respond to the different contexts of each location within the design and planning. So, although performing well commercially through providing retail and entertainment facilities, they perform poorly in providing other opportunities for developing local enterprise, or addressing social welfare needs, focusing on models of consumption to drive growth rather than creation to build local economic prosperity.

The locations of Shenyang, Dalian and Wushan, selected for this project proposal represent very different industrial and cultural heritages. They represent heavy industrial zones, towns famous for cultural heritage and coastal or port cities. From imperial legacy and industrial power, to social upheaval and conservation of natural beauty, each location presents particular opportunities and challenges for how its cultural heritage may be best understood and interpreted, and how collective cultural memory may be positively activated to inspire and promote appropriate responses to urban renewal and economic redevelopment.

### **3 Methodology**

The post-industrial sites within each city that are currently earmarked for potential regeneration have been identified by the research partners, providing a focus for the research investigations in each location. An evidence-based research methodology will be employed through each stage of the project, including case study analysis, ethnographic studies, and participatory design-led workshops. Promoting inclusion and critical analysis will be highly important in balancing potentially competing agendas such as social welfare, commercial enterprise, and centric urban renewal strategies.

As part of an initial visit to each of the site locations a series of qualitative, ethnographic studies have been and will continue to be conducted in Shenyang, Dalian and Wushan. These include observational and participatory methods that seek to gain insights from a range of local stakeholders such as residents, community leaders, municipal service providers, civic and educational leaders. The research seeks to engage core constituents that collectively embody China's current, and future, consumers and creators of a sustainable, relevant, fit for purpose creative economy. Location-based, semi-structured interviews have formed and will continue to be the basis of these studies, along with 'walking' interviews conducted over an extended period that capture a range of personal narratives of people's experience of living and working in the locations of Shenyang, Dalian, and Wushan. This approach is highly visceral and provides researchers with a deeper understanding of culturally held values, social histories, attitudes towards regeneration, and insights into urban characteristics that inform how an understanding of place and identity may unlock potential opportunities for culturally coherent regeneration strategies.

The research team anticipate that this level of critical enquiry will continue to uncover many particularities of the selected regional sites and their associated cultural narratives. It is also recognised that such socially inclusive, qualitative approaches as human centred ethnographic studies, will generate a quantity of interrelated subjective and objective data, which will need to be carefully disaggregated as part of the research team's analysis and evaluation processes. However, the opportunity to apply these methods, and the insights they will reveal, maximises the level of support and local access our Chinese partners are affording this project to an unprecedented degree. The subsequent results of the research study will potentially carry a high level of impact in regional and national policy making, due to its relevance at a socio-cultural level, and its resonance with constituent values and sense of identity. The project team Chinese partners are highly respected; for example, The China National Painting Academy is China's top art school, and so the Chinese government and aspirational universities and organisations across the country will monitor the activities closely. Analysis and discussion resulting from the site visits and ethnographic case studies will enable the planning and construction of

a series of locally focused research activities that explore the generation of potential design-led solutions via the delivery of participatory creative workshops.

## **4 Interviews with Chinese Stakeholders**

This work-in-progress paper reports on responses from the initial series of interviews conducted with artists and creative practitioners, and with local government officials. Specifically, the interviews have been conducted at the sites of: the decommissioned Wushan Cement Factory; 1905 Cultural and Creative Park, Shenyang; Heshe Art Zone, Dalian; No. 15 Warehouse, Dalian and International Yacht Harbour and Eastern Water Town, Dalian. Interview templates with questions for the initial stakeholder groups were generated to provide a consistency in questioning but which also recognised the difference in context for each. The semi-structured interview questions focused on (1) stakeholder context (2) current practices (3) development strategies (4) key challenges. These themes provided a basis for each interview to follow, but did not seek to constrain the interviewees' responses, as gaining personal perspectives was an important part of the interview process.

### **4.1 Artist/Practitioner Interviews**

Wang Xueli, owner of Dalian Jungle Cultural and Creative Limited in Heshe Art Zone, is a carpenter who creates bespoke luxury wooden objects such as rocking chairs and sideboards (see figure 4). In an interview with the project team, Wang (Guo; Roberts; Spruce 2018a) explained that his business has been very successful since moving to Heshe Art Zone: "People place an order a long time in advance and then wait for me to complete the work... I am unable to keep up with the demand for my products. Everything takes a long time to make and I have many people who wish to buy from me." Interestingly, he did not value particularly the fact that Heshe Art Zone could be considered part of a new cultural wave or urban regeneration- or even that he was surrounded by other artists and craftspeople. It is apparent that he has a true vocation and valued Heshe Art Zone for its low-cost rent and convenient location. His goal is not to pursue fame or wealth but it is to continue to make beautiful hand-made objects which provide him with a sense of fulfilment: "I do not make a large amount of money but am making enough for quite a decent living. It does not matter to me that I am not making more because happiness and fulfilment in my work is more important to me. I hope to continue in this way with this business." (Guo; Roberts; Spruce 2018a). It is evident that commitment to his bespoke crafted objects, and personal satisfaction at work, are key motivators for Wang Xueli. He is not swayed by proximity to other creatives or by the desire to be part of the fashionable post-industrial regeneration projects in China.



Figure 4; Wang Xueli (right), owner of Dalian Jungle Cultural and Creative Limited, with his Assistant, (left). Source: Emma Roberts

Similarly, artist Zhao Lin, who has a studio and creative arts business in Shenyang's 1905 Cultural and Creative Park, states that making art is her vocation and that she too does not seek great financial rewards when making her work: "I am not making any money. I am only breaking even and so it is not a good financial living. However, making art is my vocation and I am not particularly motivated by making money. It is more important to me to spend each day in making art and having a good quality of life- even if I do not have enough money. I will keep going as long as possible in this way until I run out of money." (Guo; Roberts; Spruce 2018b). Zhao Lin rents a portion of a room that is shared with other artists and designers; however, her own space is defined. She works and shows her work inside an extant copper tank belonging to the previously industrial site which has a section of the vertical wall removed so that it acts like a window for displaying her work (see figure 5) The top of the tank is also removed and this allows her to see up to the original glass panes of the former factory roof. Zhao Lin gains inspiration for her creativity as a result of this setting and commented: "I particularly wanted to rent this specific space- inside an old industrial tank inside the room. It is quite cosy inside here and it is easier to stay warm. I can look up and see nature- the rain, clouds, sun etc. and so although I am inside an old tank and inside a room in an old factory, I still feel connected to nature every day and this is very inspirational to me. I enjoy looking up and knowing that it is raining or if it is sunny. It is like being outside even though I am inside." (Guo; Roberts; Spruce 2018b).



Figure 5; Zhao Lin, Studio Artist at Shenyang's 1905 Cultural and Creative Park.  
Source: Emma Roberts

#### 4.2 Local Government Interviews

Interestingly, there seems to be a disconnect between the foci of users of the space compared to the concerns of local government officials who are responsible for implementing these new urban redevelopments according to government edicts. The users of the spaces- the creatives- demonstrate their passion for making individual bespoke objects and see this as the product of and holistic lifestyle. They live for their work and thereby pursue personal fulfilment and creative joy- rather in the manner advocated by the British nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts Movement proponents. In contrast, it seems that representatives from local government have observed the cachet that arises from recent urban regeneration projects and perhaps believe that releasing a new former industrial site will guarantee creativity and economic revival.

For example, in Shenyang, Mr. Kui, a Shenyang local government official, explained that prescient goals for the city are “1) to establish Shenyang as the National Centre City; 2) to have a centre in technology creation; 3) to create an area for advanced equipment for manufacturing (smart manufacturing); 4) to create a high-quality living centre.” (Guo; Roberts; Spruce 2018c). So, technology and smart manufacturing were key goals for him and other city leaders, in contrast to artist Zhao Lin's emphasis on hand-made, individual objects such as painted ceramic cups or flower pots. Kui does believe that it is vital to preserve the features that remain from heavy industry uses (such as winches, cogs, turbines etc.), but this seems to be because these features are believed to provide stimulating visual cues which indicate that 'creativity' is present and possible. He commented that Shenyang's “old urban plan

had heavy industry especially in one city region- very concentrated. When developers remove this to another area it provides an opportunity to develop a new creative and cultural area based on old heritage... The elements left over from the old uses become the key to start a new creative industry. Without these old elements nothing is possible.”(Guo; Roberts; Spruce 2018c). He also believes that former industrial workers, such as factory employees, can transfer easily to new roles within the creative industries that replace the functions of their previous workplaces: “A worker who had a role in a very large traditional factory can easily transfer to a small role within a much smaller creative-focussed industrial factory.” (Guo; Roberts; Spruce 2018c). However, this perspective perhaps assumes that creativity itself is easily generated and easily accessible to all workers. It also suggests that financial rewards are almost guaranteed following the process of urban renewal.

An interview with Mr Yang, a local government official in Wushan, revealed that national government environmental policies are also important drivers in considering the redevelopment of post-industrial sites.” (Guo; Roberts; Spruce, J. 2018d). Plans for the redevelopment of the local cement factory that was decommissioned in 2015 following such changes in national government policy, are being considered with the ambition to convert the site into a media and film studio hub for the region to be called ‘The 175 Three Gorges Creative Industry Park’. According to Mr Yang this redevelopment is highly important to the town’s future, as the majority of employment within the town is already related to the tourist industry, due to its position at the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River (see figure 5). The tourist industry currently accounts for approximately 70% of the town’s workforce, with the remaining 30% being involved in agriculture. Therefore, the development tourism was identified as the primary focus in continuing to grow and fuel much of the local economy. Though great in ambition for the site’s redevelopment, and the economic benefits it may bring to the local economy, recognising the need for redevelopment to comply with national government guidance on environmental protection was also an imperative. Mr Yang suggested that “If the plans to develop the factory site into a media and film centre are delivered, then there may be the need for additional capacity in hotels, and other tourist and visitor type facilities to be developed in Wushan itself” (Guo; Roberts; Spruce, J. 2018d) and that, in this way, introducing creative industries to the area would benefit local people and the economy.



Figure 5; Three Gorges of the Yangtze River at Wushan, Source: Jon Spruce

A further interview with a local guide employed by Wushan town authorities, a resident of the area all his life, revealed that there was recognition by the authorities of the previous environmental damage caused by industrialisation. In Wushan, specifically following the construction of the Three Gorges Hydroelectric Dam in 2012, raising the local river level by 175 metres and submerging Wushan's old town. The local authority were therefore very keen to pursue the cement factory site redevelopment as the film and media centre proposals relate to an existing film festival that takes place in Wushan, drawing in people from across the region. Historically the area is very important to China, both in terms of the development of the country's culture and because of its status as an area of natural beauty. It is hoped that combining these things together will bring more tourists and develop the areas creative cultural importance.



Figure 6; Wushan's decommissioned cement factory and local official, Source: Jon Spruce and Emma Roberts

Indeed, officials interviewed so far are very receptive to receiving the information generated from the project. Jiang Kun, a designer of two creative cultural parks in Dalian states: "We need the help of such a research team so much. As a group of self-employed developers of cultural parks, we can't compete with those state-owned cultural parks, which have powerful support. To avoid the unnecessary problems, we would like to get a modular design deriving from this project's research results to test the feasibility of our planning. I really hope to see the application of the research results of this project in China." (Guo; Roberts; Spruce, J. 2018e) and such a modular design, based on the cumulative research conducted during this upcoming two and a half year period, is certainly part of the projection.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

As the project is still at a very early stage, only launching in October 2018, it is not yet possible to draw any robust conclusions. However, following the initial site visits and early stakeholder interviews at the locations in China, some emerging themes have been identified, including: the vocational train of mind apparent in creative practitioners; the value placed on bespoke works by practitioners and their clients; the linkage between urban regeneration zones and local universities, and the potential for a disconnect between the practitioners that inhabit the creative park sites and those driving urban redevelopment.

So far, the project researchers have observed that one criterion for success of repurposed industrial sites, seems to be strong links with local universities. For example, various walls in Heshe Art Zone in Dalian are painted with street art made by students of Luxun Academy of Fine Art and the studios are populated to a large

extent by graduates of the art school and by staff who also teach there or who were former teachers. Similarly, the 1905 Creative and Cultural Park in Shenyang hosts exhibitions by current students of Luxun Academy of Fine Art and provides rented studio space for many ex-students. Additional sites that are primed for redevelopment, and which could benefit from this project's recommendations, are also being studied by researchers at nearby universities. For example, the former light bulb factory- 'Wisdom Park' - in Dalian is being assessed by researchers from Dalian Polytechnic University and local art students are again tagging the area and painting street art murals on the walls (see figure 7).

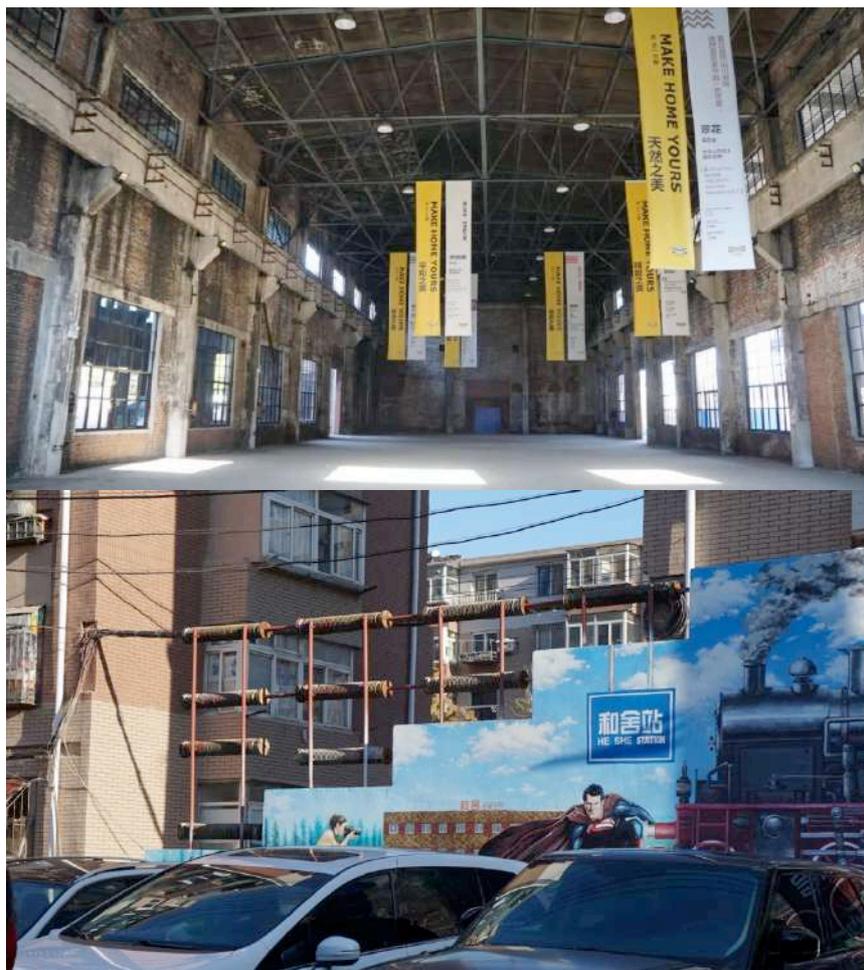


Figure 7; Wisdom Park, Dalian and local LUXAN art school student street art.  
(Source: Emma Roberts and Fang Bin Guo)

The potential for a disconnection between the values of creative practitioners who inhabit the redeveloped sites and creative parks, and those driving some urban renewal projects, such as local authorities and private developers is clearly evident in the initial interviews conducted. As Wang and Li are noted to have observed earlier, the gentrification of sites resulting from economic success may threaten true validity and potential. This is something that for some at least may threaten the authenticity and sustainability of renewal projects aimed at stimulating local creative

economies. Wang and Li (2009) highlight previous instances of this tension early in the redevelopment of Beijing's 798 Art Zone: "As early as 2004, the very pioneer Sui Jianguo removed his studio from 798. Three years later, the other leading personality, Huang Rui, left as well. By March 2009, the number of artists among the pioneer group was lower than 30. Aside from the complaint that the district became "more about a show rather than serious art," another fundamental factor that drove the artists out was the rise in rent, which ranged from 2 to 7 RMB per sq. meters per day, more than doubled that in 2002. The frequent interruptions by the increasing amount of tourists are complained as annoying. Artists, who used to actively seek public attention during the battle against demolition, now see it a burden". (Wang and Li, 2009, p.884)

As the project continues to generate further findings over the coming two and a half years, the research conclusions and conceptual ideas for regeneration of the sites may further highlight their potential roles as cultural hubs for creative practitioners, students, tourists and interested locals. Such hubs may become ideal locations for exhibitions of artists' and designers' work, with these relationships stimulated by the academic project partners located within regional arts institutions promoting the inclusion of small businesses to produce culturally relevant products, or works of art and craft. These are likely to support the preservation of Chinese cultural heritage and ensure that traditional crafts and techniques are not dismissed as a result of the desire to advance in applying contemporary creative technologies. Third sector and community based organisations may benefit from the research, as its methods highlight the value of developing a deeper understanding of cultural identity, and the role this can play in fostering social wellbeing, harnessed positively through sensitive urban regeneration. This is also valuable for the general public, as the repurposing of industrial sites will potentially provide better prospects in areas which are now experiencing post-industrial decline and unemployment.

More broadly, the future results of this study will benefit other researchers in the field by providing a comparison of existing western and Chinese urban renewal projects within one study, generating a combined series of results that evaluate the effectiveness of these schemes in promoting economic growth, creative enterprise, social welfare and cultural engagement. The results will inform future urban renewal strategies, and be of relevance across both Europe and China. The results of the case studies and ethnographic research activities will further inform constituency-driven spatial concepts as proposals for regeneration of industrial sites, promoting an inclusive model of co-creation that is still uncommon across Europe and China, but is quickly becoming a recognised approach to enabling local authority and constituency agreement that is required for large-scale renewal projects.

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