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# Making a cultural cluster in China: A study of Dafen Oil Painting Village, Shenzhen

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## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

Cultural industry  
Dafen Village  
Branding exercise  
Painter-workers

Capitalizing on cultural resources to promote economic and urban development has increasingly become a major concern in cities in the world. This paper examines the case of Dafen Oil Painting Village in Shenzhen, China, which has been transformed from a poor rural village to a major oil painting production centre. This study tries to unravel the realities behind the “Dafen Brand”, with special attention on the forces behind the branding exercise and the associated socio-economic consequences as observed from the doubly deprived painter-workers. Dafen’s art practitioners encounter severe economic hardship similar to the difficulties faced by other rural migrant workers in China’s major metropolises.

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## Introduction

Urban landscapes have undergone tremendous transformation under intensified inter-city competition in conjunction with economic and cultural globalization (Harvey, 1989; Knox, 1991). Many countries, including the United States, Great Britain, South Korea and Singapore, have made use of culture to promote tourism and economic growth as well as to foster urban regeneration. In China, recently culture has also become an important policy instrument (Wang, 2001), constituting an integral part of municipal governments’ landscape beautification drives and urban development and regeneration programmes (Wang, 2012; Zhong, 2009). In Shenzhen, for instance, culture development is seen as a strategy to revitalize the “three olds” (old industrial sites, old villages, and old towns).

It is in this context that the Village of Dafen has experienced a major transformation to become an oil painting production hub. Since the publicity of Dafen Village as a cluster of ‘painters’ by the local newspaper Yangcheng Evening Post in 1999 (Wen, 2007), the Village soon caught the attention of the Shenzhen Municipal Government, which was trying to respond to the national call for culture building. Aside from its cultural element, the cluster of trade-painting studios also demonstrates robust growth in revenue. Official reports claim that the Village now occupies over 60 per cent

of the global trade-painting market. It often secures contracts worth of millions of US dollars in the bi-annual Canton (Guangzhou) Trade Fair (Ji, 2010). No wonder, then, the Village has gained applause from all domestic media as a developmental model as well as another miracle of Shenzhen, the symbol of China’s economic reform since its designation as a special economic zone in 1979.

The story of Dafen was chosen to be the main theme of the Shenzhen Pavilion in the Best Urban Practices Zone of the 2010 Shanghai Expo. Dafen, “the most beautiful urban village in Shenzhen”, “integrates urban and rural development”, “showcases how culture development can flourish in an outlying area” (Southern Daily, 20-07-2011), and fundamentally “epitomizes the rapid development of Shenzhen” (China Daily, 2010). In the 26th Shenzhen Summer Universiade of 2011, Dafen likewise was used to showcase the city’s advancement in the “new economy”.

But behind the promotion displays and branding efforts, what is the real picture of Dafen as an oil painting hub? Is Dafen really a national pride? In what respects does the remaking of this once backward rural village on the outskirts of Shenzhen a result of complex interplays of grassroots initiatives and policy formulations at upper-level governments, including the district government, the municipal government and the central government at Beijing, in the context of “development is the hard principle” preached by the late patriarch Deng Xiaoping? Who are the main actors involved and who benefit most from Dafen’s culture industry-related transformation? What characterize the life experiences of the thousands of painter-workers whose labour is central to the

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making of Dafen as an internationally known, if not renowned, ensemble of production and trading of both Chinese- and Western-style paintings. Fieldworks were conducted in 2011 and 2012 to help answer these questions. The field studies included on-site observations and 50 in-depth interviews, with the purpose of soliciting the views of painter-workers and artists, art dealers, and local and foreign visitors in the village. First-hand data are supplemented by documentary data from Dafen Art, an internal magazine published by the Dafen Art Museum, as well as government documents, newspaper articles, commentaries from critics in the West, and artists' blogs.

In the next section we review in greater detail the literature on culture as an industry and an urban development and regeneration strategy. Then, we discuss the efforts undertaken by the Shenzhen and Dafen authorities to build cultural industries, and how these initiatives are related to China's hierarchical territorial governance structure and the division of the Shenzhen Municipality into two distinct zones: the special economic zone (SEZ) and the rest of the city. Next, both field investigations and documentary evidence are invoked to further unravel what constitute the "Dafen Brand" in the context of the industrialization of art and culture, and also the plight of Dafen's struggling painter-workers. Hand-painted copies of masterpieces are primarily targeted at the US and European markets in response to rising consumerism in post-industrial societies. Yet, Dafen is seen by art critics in the West as a hotbed of forgeries. In the conclusion section, we argue that any model of culture-led growth has to take account of the cultural-historical meanings of the particular locality.

### Culture as an industry and urban (re)development strategy

The meaning of culture is always subject to contestation, so is that of cultural industry/industries. Debates can be traced back to the Frankfurt School in the 1940s ([Horkheimer & Theodor, 1972](#)), which coined the term Culture Industry to describe how art and culture, used to be practised in a tailored aura, was installed on Fordist production lines, that is, converted to standardized products without enlightenment value. Studies on pop culture in the United Kingdom, nevertheless, maintain that massively produced culture might serve as a hotbed for free expressions and spur social and political reflections ([Morley & Chen, 1996](#)). Recently, attention on culture as capital has surged in post-industrial economies to counteract the decline of manufactory industries ([Castells, 2000](#); [Scott, 2006](#); [Swedberg & Schumpeter, 1991](#)). The merge of culture and urban regeneration can be dated back to the 1970s and early 1980s, when cities in the post-industrial era were experiencing massive economic restructuring and declines ([Lin & Hsing, 2009](#)). Inspired by cases of culture-led urban renaissance like Bilbao, mayors and other decision makers have detected the robust power of culture in urban regeneration ([Peck, 2005](#)). Cultural remaking of cities is engineered worldwide. Examples include the "European City of Culture" initiated by the EU and the "Creative City Network" by the UNESCO. Under this account, culture-themed mega projects, cultural clusters, and mega-exhibitions (such as the World Expos and Olympics) and festivals are promoted as strategies to boost urban growth and renaissance ([Evans, 2003](#)).

Advocates contend that culture-centred development creates a post-industrial urban landscape, which helps to attract investment, and improve public finance and economic competitiveness ([Strom, 2002](#); [Whitt, 1987](#)). The construction of cultural infrastructures and launching of arts festivals serves as catalysts for job creation and urban revitalization. Critics ([Harvey, 2001](#); [Zukin, 1995](#)), however, argue that it unavoidably causes problems such as overlooking citizen's identity building and local cultural meanings. Moreover, the costs of cultural projects are often borne by those who can least

afford them. And rising rent displaces artists and other creative professionals ([Lloyd, 2006](#); [Zukin, 1982](#)). Questions are therefore raised regarding the politics involved in the formation of creative groups and their spaces: What is considered creative or innovative and who benefits from this process ([Christopherson & van Jaarsveld, 2005](#); [Indergaard, 2009](#))?

In recent years the notion of cultural industry has been taken up by policy makers in China, where culture is now recognized as a significant regional and urban development tool ([Oakes, 2006](#)). The central government officially declared cultural industries to be part of the national development strategies in the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) ([MCPRC, 07-2000](#)). In 2004, the National Bureau of Statistics defined "cultural industries" as activities which provide products and services of culture and entertainment to the general public and other related activities ([NBSC, 2004](#)). The current (12th) Five-Year Plan (2011–2015) further identifies culture industry as a pillar industry. At the same time, culture-related urban regeneration has also caught the attention of policy makers. The 798 Art District in Beijing probably is the most frequently cited case, in which artists, dealers, galleries, art critics, art fairs and biennales are interwoven into a tight network, resembling the Western model of artist ecology ([Markusen & Schrock, 2006](#); [Pratt, 2004](#); [Wang, 2012](#)). Many cities have formulated detailed plans for cultural development. For instance, over 80 creative industrial parks emerged in Shanghai within two years after the introduction of "Creative Industrial Park Programme" in 2004 ([Wang, 2009](#); [Wang & Li, 2011](#)).

### Development of cultural industry in Shenzhen and Dafen

#### Shenzhen

To contextualize the development of Dafen as a trade-painting centre, it is useful to review the development of cultural industry in the City of Shenzhen as a whole. Shenzhen was designated as a SEZ in 1979, where preferential policies were offered to incoming investments ([Li, 2009](#)). Along with other localities in the PRD, the "front shop, back factory" (*qiandian houchang*) model characterized Shenzhen's early economic growth. Within a short period of time, Shenzhen was transformed to a manufactory base housing thousands of factories, mainly relocated from Hong Kong. The main industries were textiles and garments, rubber and plastics, toy manufacturing, and consumer electronics.

Initially, the official concern on cultural development was mainly about building an identity so as to glue Shenzhen's essentially immigrant population together. In a survey on home consciousness, 18.6% of the respondents denied Shenzhen as their home, and 31.1% were not sure whether Shenzhen was their home or not ([Pang & Ulan, 2008](#): p. 62). The issue of discovering, if not cultivating, the local culture to develop loyalty of its habitants and more importantly, enterprises, became pressing in the early 2000s, when many firms moved from Shenzhen to other cities. The blog "Shenzhen, who abandoned you?" that caught national attention in 2004 perhaps exemplified the challenges faced by the municipal government ([Wo, 2002](#)). Experiencing its first economic stagnation since founding, the city was enveloped by a feeling of loss of orientation. The national call for developing cultural industry in 2000 was a call just in time.

In January 2003 the Shenzhen Municipal Government introduced the slogan "Build the City on Culture" (*wenhua lishi*). The slogan was changed to "Build a Leading Cultural City" (*wenhua qiangshi*) in 2009 to stress the government's determined will to join the world city league. In order to nurture a "cultural economy", the Shenzhen Municipal Government has designated Cultural Industry to be the fourth pillar industry, after high-technology, finance and

logistics (*Shenzhen Daily*, 02-06-2011). The power of culture in renovating deteriorated areas is emphasized, with a view to redeveloping the “three olds” – old factories, old villages and old urban districts – into culture industry parks (PGSZM, 25-02-2008). A number of places, including Dafen Village, are endorsed to be “Cultural Industry Demonstration Bases” (*wenhua chanye fazhan shifan jidi*), each of which is assigned a specific mission. Table 1 provides a list of these places.

#### Dafen

Only the part of Shenzhen City bordering Hong Kong was demarcated as SEZ in the early 1980s. In early reform times entry to the SEZ where signs of “capitalist decadence” were everywhere was under tight control. Indeed, the entire boundary between the SEZ and the rest of the city was barbed. Although Dafen was only about 20 min drive from the Hong Kong border, it was outside the SEZ (see Fig. 1) and did not enjoy the preferential policies given to the latter. Probably quite unintentionally, Hong Kong-based factories mushroomed outside the SEZ boundary so as to take advantage of almost unrestricted inflow of labour from China's interior provinces. Industrial development in Shenzhen and elsewhere in the PRD was concentrated along the Guangzhou–Shenzhen (G–Z) Highway (Li, 2009). Dafen, because of its relative remoteness from the highway, once again was left out in this wave of frenetic industrialization, which took place under a “pollution first, treatment later” mentality. Chaos prevailed in the industrial corridor. Hundreds of towns and villages in the main industrial belt of the PRD were soon turned to expanses of unruly derelict factory premises and dumping grounds of industrial wastes.

With the benefit of hindsight, the marginalized position of Dafen might in fact be a blessing. Because of the relative absence of industrial pollution, in comparison with the booming industrial villages and towns in the PRD, arguably the built environment of Dafen was more conducive to developing art-related activities. In 1989, Huang Jiang, a Hong Kong master in trade painting rented a

room of 200 m<sup>2</sup> in size as his studio to take advantage of the cheap land and the almost infinite supply of migrant labour available in the Village (Wen, 2007). Today, Dafen, a village of merely 4 km<sup>2</sup> in area, accommodates more than 5000 migrant workers and over 800 art shops and galleries selling all kinds of art works, including both Western and Chinese paintings, calligraphy, arts and crafts, sculptures, and stationeries like picture frames. Above it was pointed out that one estimate put Dafen's oil painting exports' share of world total at 60%; millions of US dollars in profit are generated each year (Ji, 2010).

#### Branding and institutionalization of Dafen as a trade-painting centre

In China there exists a highly hierarchical and nested territorial government structure. Bilateral relations between local governments at the same level are not allowed. Furthermore, government at a certain level normally can only report to its immediate supervisor at the next higher level. Direct relations between the former and government at still a higher level, even if it is subsumed under the latter's jurisdiction, are rare if not inappropriate (Ma, 2005). In the case of the relationship between Shenzhen Municipality and Dafen Village, the situation is somewhat different, however. Fig. 2 maps the respective lines of authority governing the relations between different levels of government and organizations involved in the administration, development and promotion of Dafen as a trade-painting centre. As can be seen, the Shenzhen Municipal Government has assumed a direct role in steering the development of Dafen, especially in the realm of place branding.

Dafen's rising status as a painting production and trade centre, quite naturally, has attracted the attention of all levels of government having jurisdictional rights over it. Jurisdiction-wise, Dafen Village (*Cun*) belongs to Buji Street (*Jiedao*) (a “street” in the Chinese administrative sense is a sub-district), which in turn belongs to Longgang District (*Qu*), one of the eight urban districts of Shenzhen

**Table 1**  
A list of culture industry parks/districts in Shenzhen.

Name	Type of transformation	Major features
Dafen Oil Painting Village, Longgang District	Regeneration of an old village	An oil painting cluster famous for copied oil paintings, with a chain of industries that sells original oil paintings, Chinese paintings, calligraphy, arts and crafts, sculptures, and xpicture frames (DV, 2011).
China Guanlan Original Printmaking Base, Bao'an District	Regeneration of an old village	An original Chinese printmaking base, with creation, production, exhibition, collection, communication, research, training and marketing development (CGOPB, 2011).
Sanlian Crystal & Jade Village	Regeneration of an old village	A community specializing in processing and marketing crystal and jade (SCET, 2006).
Shenzhen “City of Design Creative Design Industrial Estate”, Futian District	Transformation of an old industrial area	A hub for industrial design, providing services such as research and development, production, trade, exhibition, information exchange, training and evaluation of public services; praised as “China's Champion Industrial Design Park” ( <i>Zhongguo gongye sheji diyi yuan</i> ), and an important project in the 12th Five-Year Plan of Shenzhen (SCDCDIE, 2008).
Shenzhen OCT East, Yantian District	Transformation of an old industrial area	A combination of two large theme parks, resort hotels, three small scenic towns, and golf courses; one of the popular tourist spots in Shenzhen (SZOCTE, 2011).
Century Craftwork Culture Square, Futian District	Transformation of an old industrial area	Specializing in arts and culture exhibition, sales of art and craft products, warehouse services, property management, culture and market management; a prominent handicraft culture marketplace in South China (CCCS, 2011).
Shenzhen Cartoon & Animation Town, Luohu District	Transformation of an old industrial area	The first shopping mall in Shenzhen themed with animation, video games, and cartoons (SCAT, 2011).
Nanshan Digital Culture Industrial Base, Nanshan District	Transformation of abandoned buildings	Provision of services including investment and finance, theoretical research, product innovation to cultural enterprises, particularly the newly established ones (GPPEDSB, 2011).

Source: edited by the authors.



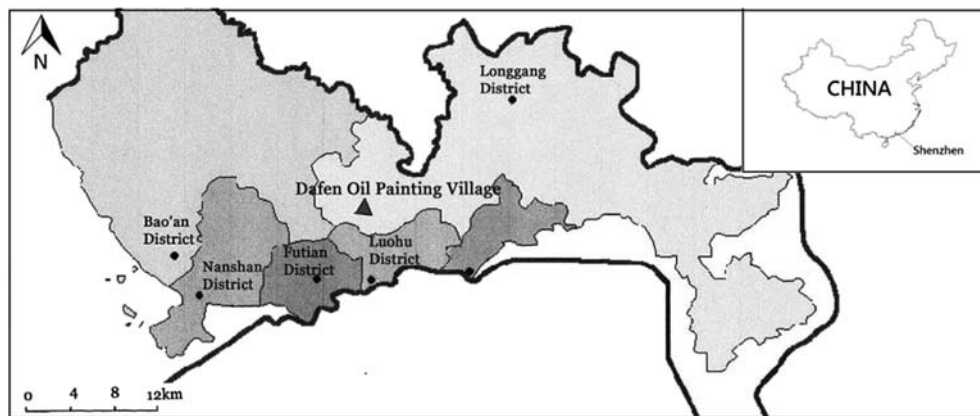


Fig. 1. The location of Dafen in Shenzhen City. Source: adapted from Map Town, 2011.

Municipality. In theory, the state administration hierarchy only extends to the street level, and the “street office” is mainly responsible for public services delivery and ideological inculcation and political control at the community level (Wu, 2005). A village is a rural collective administered by “village management office”, which is not formally a level of government (Ma, 2005). In the PRD as well as the Yangtze Delta, almost all (former) rural villages have undergone “corporate” transformation, under which the concerned village collective becomes a holding company, with the shareholders being the individual households of the village (Jiang & Chen, 2007). The board of directors of the village corporation and the management team of the village management office are essentially the same. The main assets of the corporation consist of the village’s business undertakings, and the land within the village’s jurisdiction.

In the case of Dafen, the main objective of the Dafen Corporation Ltd. and hence the Dafen Village Management Office, quite naturally, is to make profit and promote economic growth. How to build the physical as well as institutional infrastructures to develop the Village as a trade-painting centre and formulate appropriate branding exercises tops the policy agenda of the Village Corporation/Management Office. As Fig. 2 illustrates, it has constructed the Dafen Art Museum, the Dafen Exchange Square of Oil Painting, and the Dafen Oil Painting Cultural Garden. It has also initiated the annual Dafen Cultural Carnival and the Dafen Oil Painting Copying competition. Of course, the Village Management Office is responsible for providing social services to its constituent peasant-households and ensuring the presence of a congenial environment for the long-term sustainability of the Village as a community and as an enterprise. Thus, even though the Village Corporation/

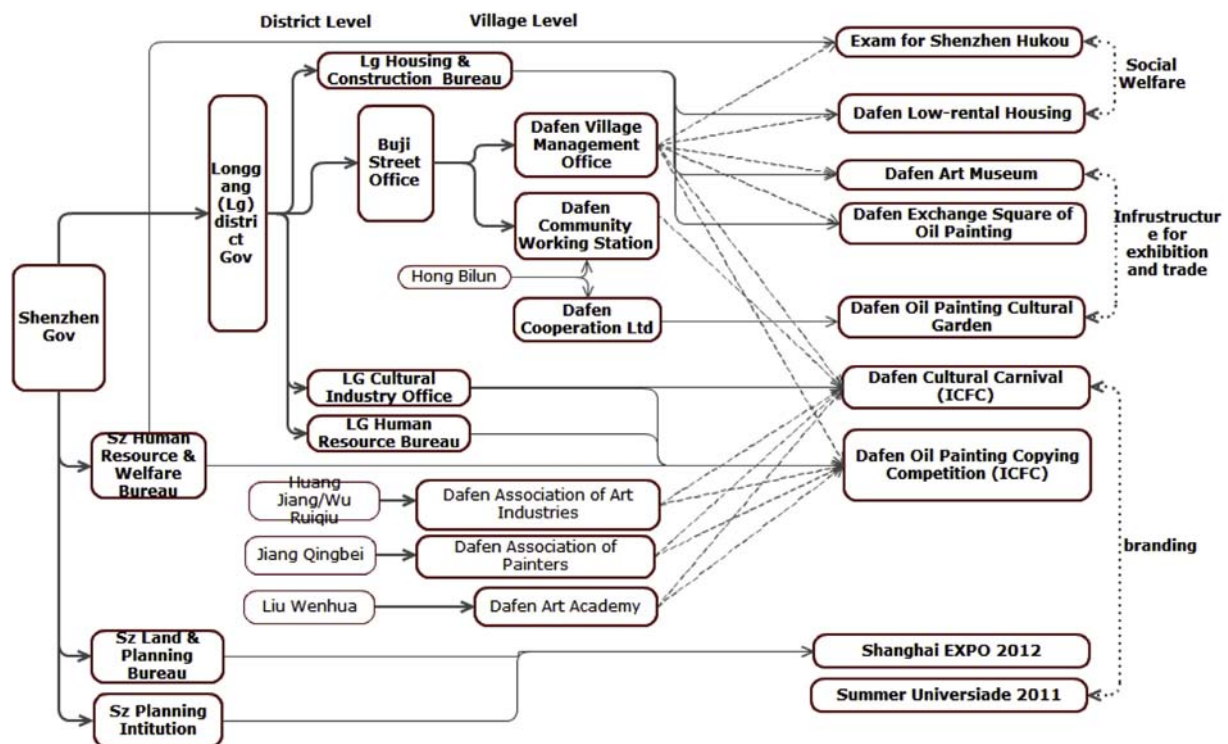


Fig. 2. The governing structure of Dafen Village. Source: compiled by the authors.

Management Office falls outside the governmental administration proper, it performs governmental functions, including the launching of a low-cost rental housing project that has extended the eligibility criteria to include migrant workers.

Shenzhen is a city with a resident population of 10.36 million, according to the 2010 Population Census (Shenzhen Statistical Bureau, 2011). In such a large metropolis, district-level government is often accorded some degree of autonomy in managing its own affairs. Longgang District, to which Buji Street and hence Dafen Village belong, used to fall outside of the former SEZ boundary and did not enjoy the preferential policies accorded to the SEZ. Instead, it was given discretions in formulating its own policies to attract investment. As a district with a population in excess of 2 million, Longgang District Government today is designated as a “special new district” emphasizing green and low-carbon development by the Shenzhen Municipal Government. As Fig. 2 shows, the District Government is directly involved in the various initiatives of the Dafen Corporation/Village Management Office, bypassing the Buji Street Office.

But as far as the branding of Dafen is concerned, the propaganda divisions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the municipal level have played pivotal roles. The Shenzhen Municipal Government has deployed substantial amount of resources to help shape and promote the image of Dafen. The objective is not only to expose the Dafen products to the broader market, but also to advocate the thriving cultural development of Shenzhen City to the outside world. Direct links exist between the municipal government and the Village Management Office. The exhibition at the Shanghai EXPO is an exemplar. A number of authorities at the upper tier of the governing hierarchy were mobilized to take part in this event. They included the Shenzhen Municipal Land, the Shenzhen Planning Bureau, the Shenzhen Planning Institution, and a vice mayor. At the bottom tier of the hierarchy, i.e. the working level, administrative duty and state-built properties management fall on the Dafen Village Management Office. The latter represents the Buji Street Office on site to deal with a wide range of administrative issues, such as the organization of the International Cultural Industries Fair (ICIF) at Dafen and the Dafen Oil Painting Copying Competition. Thanks to the extensive social networks possessed by higher-tier authorities, star professionals were commissioned to be curators in Dafen. Examples include the “sea-turtle (*haigui* or overseas returnee)” architect Meng Yan who won scores of national and international awards, and Director Mou Seng who made his fame through experimental theatres in Beijing. The holding of the 2011 Summer Universiade in Shenzhen is another example to reveal the efforts made by all levels of government of the city on branding the Village. The roads linking Dafen to the outside were upgraded and beautified. Most importantly, the completion of the Longjiang Line of Shenzhen Metro prior to the opening of this major international sports event has substantially enhanced Dafen's accessibility (SZWC, 17-06-2011). Volunteers were deployed to metro stations near Dafen so as to introduce the Village to visitors.

Aside from the mega projects, the mass media is also deployed to publicize Dafen to the rest of the country. A TV series entitled “the Origin of Paintings” (*Huazhiyuan*) and a film named “the Story of Oil Painting Village” (*Youhuacun de Gushi*) were staged in 2005 (Li & Zeng, 2005). In the following year three books, namely, *The Rise of Dafen* (*Dafencun de Queqi*), *The Dafen Legend* (*Dafen Chuanqi*) and *The Special Villagers of Dafen* (*Dafencun de Teshu Cunmin*) were published (SEZD, 2006-05-21). The name of Dafen was enhanced by the endorsement of important political figures, who were invited to present awards to the village in a generous manner, such as the “2006 China Best Creative Industry Park”, and the “Most Beautiful Tourism Showcase in the Guangdong Cultural History Category (Rural)” (CENC, 2011), to name but a few. Leading figures who have visited Dafen included Wu Bangguo, Chairman and Party Secretary of the

Standing Committee of the National People's Congress; Li Changchun, Propaganda Chief of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); and Chui Sai-on, Chief Executive of the Macau Special Administrative Region (Deng & Xiao, 2010). Their visits drew extensive media coverage. The story of Dafen soon became the spotlight of domestic media and appeared on premier overseas media such as the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, British Sky News Channel and South Korea Broadcasting Company (*Youth Online*, accessed 27-8-2010).

### Behind the reputable brand: limitations of the Dafen model

#### *Inadequate infrastructures and exorbitant rents*

In the early 1990s, many villages in Shenzhen were engulfed by the expanding city and re-designated as urban neighbourhoods. After conversion, villagers, who used to collectively own the land of the village, could now merely claim the right of building a house as their residence on a homestead (*zhai jidi*) 10 m × 10 m in size. This led to a tidal wave of construction by villagers in fear of losing even more in future. Many hands-shaking buildings, i.e. residents living in buildings on opposite sides of an alley could shake hands with each other because the buildings were so closely packed together, were erected to maximize buildable space (Wang et al., 2010). To repress the wave of massive construction, the government issued regulations in 1999 and further reiterated them in 2002 to set the maximum building floor area on a homestead at 480 m<sup>2</sup>. However, the regulations merely fuelled another two rounds of massive construction, probably due to relaxed law enforcement (Chan, Madsen, & Unger 2009; Zhou, 2008).

Dafen Village was officially converted to an urban neighbourhood in 2004, when it was physically surrounded by urban blocks so that any increase in building floor space and other constructions to accommodate the rapidly developing painting industry had to be undertaken within the village's jurisdictional boundary (Wen, 2007). Expansion beyond it was largely infeasible. When thousands of painter-workers flocked to the Village, space became a scarce commodity almost instantaneously. For prospective renters, there were two major options to find accommodation: villagers' houses and government-developed buildings. As pointed out above, the Village Management Office was primarily concerned with economic growth and image building. Since Dafen was designated as a city-level project in Shenzhen's 11th Five-Year Plan, the so-called “New Troika” of the Dafen Art Museum, the Dafen Exchange Square of Oil Paintings and Dafen Low-rental Housing have been put into implementation. For shops in the Exchange Square, the rent for the first two years is waived. But shops in the square are rented only to firms with export licences. The purpose of such a criterion is obvious: to attract enterprises capable of selling Dafen's products to overseas markets. Meanwhile, the policy discriminates less established firms, not to mention ordinary painter-workers. There is a low-rent housing project; however, applicants have to be members of the Dafen Art Association, accession to which is subject to strict and tedious scrutiny. Moreover, successful applicants have complained the poor living environment and inconvenience of the subsidized flats (Zhang et al., 2009).

In sum, the infrastructures built by the local authority are not meant to solve the problem of space scarcity; instead, they serve primarily as incentives for economic restructuring. The thousands of painter-workers are forced to rent villagers' houses. The irony is that whereas most rooms in the low-rent housing blocks stay unoccupied, rooms in the villagers' self-erected buildings are subject to intense speculation. Rent has risen sharply since 2004, when Dafen was selected as a sub-venue of the First International Culture Fair (ICIF) in China (Zhang et al., 2009). Real estate developers have been quick to capitalize on Dafen's fame and launch high-price

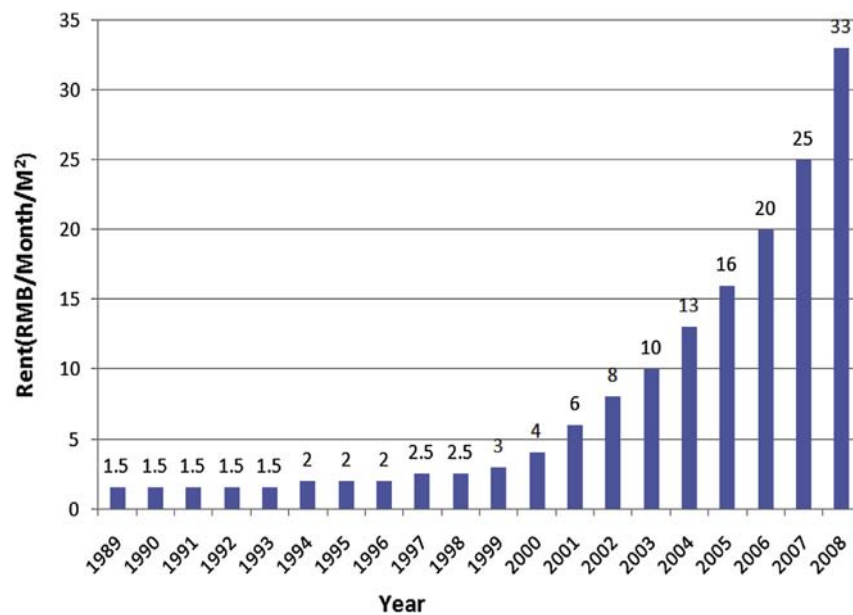


Fig. 3. Mean rent in Dafen Oil Painting Village, 1989–2008. Source: adapted from Zhang et al., 2009, p. 43.

housing projects in the Village's vicinity, thus causing further increases in rent inside the Village (Fig. 3).

There are nearly 200 painter-workers in Dafen who cannot afford to rent a shop but have to settle with renting walls sometimes even near a rubbish bin as “galleries” to display their works (Fig. 4). The monthly rent ranges from RMB 600 to RMB 1500 (approximately US\$100 to US\$250) (Wang, 2011). In addition, the “wall painters” need to install lighting, awnings and other decorations easily costing more than RMB 20,000 (approximately US\$3300). These “art galleries” have to be closed under heavy rain and strong winds. In an effort to beautify the environment for the 2011 Summer Universiade, many “wall painters” were asked to leave “voluntarily” or else face eviction. A painter, Cao Shouyong, complained that he could not understand why the paintings, which had been there for years, suddenly became an “eyesore” (Wang, 2011).

The increase in rent surely is welcomed by the local households-cum-landlords and the village committee. The artists we interviewed told us that many landlords own two to four shops, and collect more than RMB 10,000 (about US\$1600) per month in rental

income. Dafen artists in many respects are no different from China's hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers, who have made great contributions to China's economic success but are excluded from welfare protection and live under poverty.

#### *Economic hardship of painter-workers*

Painters encounter many difficulties. According to Mr Chan, a painter employed by an art gallery, most painters in Dafen are apprentices who are mainly fresh graduates from art academies, but there are also many copy workers without formal training. How much they earn is directly proportional to the number of paintings they copy. For Mr Chan, his income was barely enough to cover his living expenses. Nonetheless, he said he would stay in the Village in the next five years. In contrast, Mr Cheng, a young artist doing original paintings, expressed a different opinion. He had been in Dafen for five years. Still, he did not have a strong sense of belonging to it. Being an artist in Dafen could not give him a sense of achievement. He commented that Dafen is too commercialized. Painters just produce whatever customers want. They just think of income, instead of pursuing creativity and imagination. Mr Cheng did not want to be one of them. When he saved enough money, he would move to Hangzhou or Beijing where supposedly he could find true art and develop his potential.

Mr Chan and Mr Cheng's cases are not uncommon. “Painting has become a manual job”, said Jiang Huang, the first painting dealer in Dafen (Zhou, 2008: p. 104). The global financial tsunami of 2008 hit Dafen's business badly. In an important annual trade fair held in 2008, Dafen's art firms only secured orders amounting to RMB 1.08 million (about US\$180,000), compared to over RMB 30 million (about US\$5 million) in previous years (Zhao, 2011). A painting that previously could make a profit of RMB 70–80 (about US\$12–13) only yielded RMB 20–30 (about US\$3–5) under the financial crisis. Although subsidies have been granted to the artists by local authorities, the amount is small. Worse still, a large proportion of the subsidy has gone to the large art stores (Youth Online, accessed 27-8-2010). Many young workers need to work long hours to pay the expensive rent. They start painting around lunchtime and work until late at night. For them, mega-events and cultural infrastructures are very far away from the reality of their daily lives.



Fig. 4. Oil painting near a rubbish bin (photo taken by the authors).



Many workers have never entered the museums (Zhou, 2008). Ironically, painters who are competent of copying the world's masterpieces do not have the hope of seeing them in the original.

#### *Copyright dispute in Dafen*

Another factor that has adversely affected the image of Dafen is the lack of respect for intellectual property right. International critics mainly focus on Dafen's mass production of Western canonical masterpieces. In an article titled "Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art" in *New York Times*, Bradsher (2005) contends that Dafen is a hotbed of forgeries and knockoffs. Other headlines on Western media include "China's Art Factories: Van Gogh from the Sweatshop" (Paetsch, 2006), and "Copying Mona Lisa: The Fake Art Industry in China" (Chen, 2011). American artist groups also questioned the originality of some of the Chinese paintings. They were doubtful whether the paintings observed the copyright laws of USA. Wal-Mart decided not to stock any Chinese paintings from Dafen because of this (Bradsher, 2005). Callaghan (2009) opines that Dafen is a manufacturing undertaking instead of a creative art village. It is just one of the culprits infringing intellectual property right, which is no different from other factories producing "made-in-China" items at cheap prices and with low quality. McCabe (2010) estimates that among the 5000 "artist workers" in Dafen, only 200 do original art. Keane (2009) adds that most painters are part of the "industrial chain", which includes canvas makers, framers and copy artists working in just about every style and medium imaginable.

In response to these criticisms, recently Shenzhen authorities have introduced rules and regulations prohibiting the selling of copies of works of living painters. Artists in Dafen today have to reveal the copyright of their paintings. Moreover, the oil paintings have to clearly mark the name of the original artists, art works and the copyists (Wu & Wang, 2004). Furthermore, Piracy Squad pays visit once a month and has confiscated paintings that violate the rules (Callaghan, 2009). However, to date, no one has been prosecuted. Artists in Dafen concede that they did not pay much attention to intellectual property right in the past. Although they recognize the importance of the matter nowadays, they still do not care. They think that they are not producing forgeries; for them the paintings are honest copies and customers know that they are reproductions. Competition in the commercial painting market becomes increasingly intense. The artists sometimes unlawfully copy other enterprises' fast-sellers and sell them at a lower price (Zhou, 2008). One of our informants, Mr Chan, told us that he could churn out 20–30 replicas per day. He admitted that he never painted an original and did not intend to do so. Creativity can hardly be cultivated when the painters repeat the same task day after day.

Not surprisingly, many artists and art dealers in Dafen we interviewed were not proud of being part of this production enterprise. Mr Wong, in his thirties, had operated his art studio for twelve years. He had no intention to leave Dafen in the next five years, but he did not have a strong sense of belonging to it, either. To him, Dafen could hardly provide an environment conducive to nurturing creativity. The only thing that persuaded him to stay was the stable income from selling oil paintings. Another art dealer, Mr Chan, in his sixties, had operated a Chinese painting store in Dafen for one year. He disliked the village's environment, which, to him, was too congested, dirty, noisy and unsafe. The only thing that attracted him to start his business there was business opportunities. Mr Cheng, in his twenties, had run an original oil painting studio for five years. He was the only artist we interviewed who indicated that he would leave Dafen in the next five years. He did not have a sense of achievement working there. The struggle between pursuing creativity and generating profits always frustrated

him. To him, Dafen was a stepping stone, allowing him to save money and widen his social network. Supporting workers in Dafen such as clerks and salesmen also lacked strong attachment to the village. Ms Chan, a clerk, expected Dafen to be a place with a strong atmosphere of art before arrival. Instead, what she discovered was a noisy and untidy commercial district.

Like the artists and art dealers, the visitors we interviewed generally also held negative impressions of the village. The comments by Mr Wu were quite representative. To him, Dafen was a combination of industrial, commercial and cultural zones, with the commercial elements being the dominant. Dafen did not present a milieu of cultivating creative art. The reason that he visited Dafen was mainly because of the low price and variety of paintings he could find there. If he wanted to buy high-grade art works, he would go somewhere else.

#### **Discussions and conclusions**

By reference to the case of Dafen, this paper attempted to address the connectedness between two aspects of producing a cultural city. On the one hand, we analysed how the Chinese state at different levels aggressively brands Dafen as one of the "new economy". Trade painting is highly commented by decision makers because it meets market demands and promises instant profit return, while at the same time minimizes investment in terms of labour welfare and labour training. Dafen Village, once romanticized, serves to promote not only the Village itself but also the entire City of Shenzhen as being vibrant and creative. On the other hand, like other migrant workers trying to make a living in China's transition to a market economy amidst unprecedented urban transformation, painter-workers in Dafen sell their labour on the assembly line of artwork copying. They are either disguised by the shinning Dafen brand, or despised by international art critics. Dafen's art practitioners encounter severe economic hardship. Without land ownership and local *hukou* (formal residential status in the current place of domicile), they have to tolerate congested housing and excessive rent. The high living cost forces them to work long hours. Dafen Village shares similar problems with other urban villages in China; a salient problem is the conflicts between the local villager-landlords and the migrant-renters (Chan et al., 2009).

Although the government has implemented measures to relieve the problem, the effect so far has been minimal. The case of Dafen exemplifies the model of industrializing artistic production, which has travelled through decades from the West to developing economies. Landed on the soil rich of cheap labour, the Fordist way of artistic production adaptively adopts human beings to replace machines. With rising consumerism, hand-made products, although massively produced, are more appreciated especially in the post-industrial societies of the United States and Europe (Pang, 2008, 2009), where the bulk of Dafen products are sold. It may be pointed out that "trade painting" or making replicas of masterpieces upon commission from art dealers in fact has a long tradition in China. Emerged in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), trade painting was traditionally operated in master-apprentice studios, where the master and his apprentices work on an assembly line<sup>1</sup> (Wen, 2007; Wong, 2010). Irrespective of all the criticisms and contestations, the Dafen model has been promoted across China, with many copied Dafen Villages mushrooming. Critics on authenticity hardly

<sup>1</sup> The sector was given a vital blow by the deployment of printing machine and camera in massive production in the industrialization period, however, enters another new chapter in the post-Fordist society, wherein hand-made painting is appreciated in consumer culture.

distinguish painter-workers (including apprentices), who work on the assembly line like ordinary labourers, from art dealers and masters who organize the assembly line. The irony is that while many art dealers are praised as cultural entrepreneurs, the heavily deprived painter-workers are blamed and therefore receive no sympathy.

In China, under the logic of “development is the hard principle”, cultural industry development is primarily a policy instrument primarily to attract investment and boost economic growth. Such an economic-oriented policy could have hindered long-term development of creative industries (Keane, 2009). What, then, could the Shenzhen and Dafen authorities do to develop Dafen to become a true art centre of international repute? Any model of culture-led urban growth cannot be reduced to a purely physical spatial project without taking into consideration the present and historical socio-cultural specificities of the locality. In Dafen, other than being landlords the local villagers have played very little role in steering the course of the Village's development, although they are the shareholders of the Village Corporation. Relying on rental incomes and dividends paid by the Village Corporation, in the long term, probably would do more harm than good to the local villagers and the Village community. Moreover, the widespread apathy and often contemptuous attitude among the migrant painter-workers towards the local villager-landlords could be a source for social unrest. There is therefore a need to develop mutual respect between the local villagers and migrant-painters, and to involve both groups in decision-making processes so that they can learn from each other.

One possibility is to capitalize on Dafen's Hakka traditions. As a distinct sub-ethnic group of Han Chinese, Hakka speak their own dialect, which is quite different from either Mandarin Chinese, the national language, or Cantonese, the dominating dialect in the PRD (Constable, 1996). The word Hakka means foreign guests or settlers from outside. In this sense the migrant-painters in Dafen are also Hakka, and the contemporary ones. As a late comer to the PRD and elsewhere in south China, Hakka people were forced to settle in inaccessible and infertile hilly areas. Over the years the relative isolation of Hakka communities has engendered the development and preservation of a subculture quite distinct from the prevailing Cantonese one, although some may argue that this distinctiveness is more imaginative than real. More specifically, Hakka people place strong emphasis on education and hence comprehension of Chinese paintings and calligraphy as a means of upward mobility, and also on communal activities like singing folk songs together and dragon boat peddling on dry ground to foster community spirit. Hakka villages are also distinguished by their architectural style.

In Dafen, largely due to its relatively late start, some features as a Hakka village, both physical and cultural, have been preserved. Is it possible to maintain Dafen as an oil painting production village and develop a cultural milieu that also incorporate elements of the Village's past, including the appreciation of different forms of artistic expressions having an explicit or implicit link to Hakka traditions? This would require collaboration between the local villagers, many of whom still respect the local customs and artist expressions, and the migrant-painters, whose creative talents have yet to be tapped. Today, there are tens of millions of Hakka people who are scattered all over China, Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world. Yet Hakka people, wherever they are, appear to have a strong sense of language and cultural identity, as exemplified by the holding of annual World Hakka Conference since 1971. Even from a purely economic point of view, the incorporation and branding of Dafen's Hakka heritage is of major importance in the Village's aspiration to become a reputable art centre. Urban-industrial transformation and cultural preservation may not necessarily be contradictory. But how to achieve both not only challenges

planners in Dafen and Shenzhen, but also policy makers in other cities that are undergoing rapid urbanization and modernization.

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