Local Milieu in Developing China’s Cultural and Creative Industry: The Case of Nanluoguxiang in Beijing

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of creative milieu and cultural heritages in the development of Chinese cultural industry. Through case study of Beijing’s Nanluoguxiang, where several arts institutions and theaters concentrate, it depicts the birth and growth of a creative place for free artists in the institutional changing of Chinese cultural setting. Based on field survey data from artists, managers and visitors, it shows the spouting and growth of local creativities in a transitional economy needs atmosphere of tolerant and frequent social gathering, especially in spaces like cafes and bars. It also suggests that making a good use of local cultural and creative resources like heritages and folk customs enables the superiority of localization standing out in the wave of globalization. The key findings indicate that the newly-built creative parks might be useful to breed the creative products, but not necessary.

Keywords: Creative and Cultural Industries, Creative Milieu, Creative Spaces, Heritage, Nanluoguxiang

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of last century the set of cultural and creative industries have presented increasingly important employers, export earners, and competitive strengths in developed countries. This poses a formidable challenge to developing countries. Since cities in China used to compete for business with tax incentives and well-trained, docile and low-cost labor forces, the imperative for a change is undeniable.

Along with the on-going debate on the importance of cultural and creative industries for the economic development of cities, this discourse has been enhanced by the milieu concept and cluster concept. More and more
studies look at creative cities of developed
countries. However, there is a lack of literature
on the milieu of cultural and creative industries
in developing countries. This paper is intended
to fill this gap.

In the background of the fever of building
“creative parks” in China, this paper focuses on
Beijing’s old Nanluoguxiang where the artists
are clustering. By an in-depth interview and
survey with free artists and bar managers, the
paper argues that the role of local space and
the milieu of creative and cultural industries
can be significant in the creative processes.
While the local tolerant atmosphere has been
released by effective institutional reform, talent
will enhance the creative milieu, the related
groups such as the local fans of art may spark
off positive feedback to the locality, and the
place can be a catalyst to creative activities.
The creative infrastructure like cafes and bars
plays an important role. From this point of view,
the newly-built creative parks might be useful
to breed the creative products, but they are not
necessary. The key for the development of lo-
cal creative activities is to attract the creative
talents to be there.

POLICY BACKGROUND OF THE
CASE OF NANLUOGUXIANG

China’s cultural undertaking was treated as
a political propagandistic tool but separated
from economy for three decades after 1949.
The traditional cultural goods and services fell
in stagnancy during the overwhelming “mod-
erization” throughout the country, especially
in cities. As the economic reform proceeding,
the state art agencies have gradually gotten
rid of a purely academic style, starting to
promote art products to the market. Since the
16th National Congress of CPC in 2002, to
meet requirement for China’s entry into the
WTO, China has formally encouraged non-
government sectors to participate in cultural
undertakings. In the Tenth Five-year Plan of
National Economic and Social Development of
China in 2005, “improving culture industrial
policy, strengthening the management of market
culture products and services, promoting the
development of culture-related industry” was
addressed. Since deepening reform of cultural
system, general art troupes, publishing houses,
novels and magazines on culture, art, life and popular science, bookstores, movie
studios, theaters, TV play producers, cultural
intermediary organizations have gradually re-
structured into market businesses. Large part
of the cultural undertakings has undergone the
change of commercialization, which makes it
distinctive to study the milieu breeding of the
cultural and creative activities. The contem-
porary change of Nanluoguxiang in Beijing
reflects this situation.

Nanluoguxiang - South Gong and Drum
Lane - is in the Dongcheng district of Beijing
in the old part of town. This lane used to be the
geometry centre of the city in Yuan dynasty, and
has a history of about 740 years. Nanluoguxi-
ang is intersected by 16 branch parallel alleys
(Hutong) on both sides, showing the pattern of
“fish-bone” dating from Yuan dynasty. Among
the heritage protection areas of China, Nanlu-
oguxiang is the one which reserves the most
complete urban pattern, possesses the most
history heritage and story, and has the richest
cultural connotation. In the recent years, more
than 30 various cafes and bars are springing out
along this lane, which makes Nanluoguxiang
a place of interest for tourists and a place of
leisure for local residents.

Along the lane and in the area nearby, there
are several advanced arts research institutions
and good theaters, including The Central Acad-
emy of Drama (CAD), Beijing Art Association,
Chinese Drama Theater (CDT), Beijing Seven-
Color Children’s Theater (BBCCT), Yi-Fu
Theater, Trial Theater and so on. The actors,
directors, script writers and other artists usually
come to the cafes and bars (Figure 1).

Around the area of Nanluoguxiang inde-
pendent studios are established and dedicated
to creating contemporary Chinese theatre produc-
tions outside the old official cultural system.
They have a potential to break the barriers
among traditions, modern theatre and different
Blue Ocean Strategy: A Vehicle for Entrepreneurship Development and Economic Growth in Rural Areas
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