

THE INTERNATIONAL  
**JOURNAL**  
*Of* **THE ARTS** In Society

Volume 5, Number 1

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Songzhuang Artist Village

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE ARTS IN SOCIETY

<http://www.arts-journal.com>

First published in 2010 in Champaign, Illinois, USA by Common Ground Publishing LLC  
[www.CommonGroundPublishing.com](http://www.CommonGroundPublishing.com).

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ISSN: 1833-1866

Publisher Site: <http://www.Arts-Journal.com>

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Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system

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# Art, Culture Industry and the Transformation of Songzhuang Artist Village

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*Abstract: The paper examines the formation and transformation of the Songzhuang Artist Village, a major contemporary artist community in Beijing's eastern suburb, in the context of China's opening to marketization and globalization. Emerged in the mid 1990s, the community had been an important site of contemporary art practice in China. Many independent artists chose to live in this place, experiencing a kind of self-imposed marginal existence, free from any official affiliation. In the eyes of the authorities, the unofficial presence of artists like these had been a potential threat to the stability of society. This hostile attitude, however, has changed dramatically since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Responding to the call of the Chinese central government to develop culture industry, the local authority of Songzhuang has come to see the artist community as a valuable resource for developing local economy. With its support, the development of Songzhuang Artist Village has been rapid. In a couple of years, this former rural village has become a growing national and global center for contemporary art. Galleries, artist studios, museums have been built; housing complexes, restaurants, and other facility spaces have been constructed; and regular art festivals and exhibitions have been organized. These new developments demonstrate the changing official perception about art and culture in China; in the meantime, they are also the marks of the rapid institutionalization and commercialization of this former autonomous artist community.*

Keywords: SongZhuang Artist Village, Alternative, Mainstream, Contemporary Chinese Art, Globalization, International Exhibitions, Independent Curators, Market Economy, Culture Industry

## Introduction

**A** TOURIST VISITING Beijing with an interest in contemporary art will probably be taken to Xiaopu village, the headquarter of Songzhuang Artist Village (figure 01). Located at the eastern suburb of Beijing, this village looks not much different from other rural or semi-rural areas surrounding Beijing at the first glance. The main street of the village has small commercial shops occupying low-rising structures on two sides and behind them are peasant style courtyards and further behind farmlands. Look closely, however, one will see stylized road signs, modern sculptures, and posters of art shows dispersing amid otherwise unattractive street views (figure 02). Furthermore, with the guide of an insider, our tourist will be surprised to discover that the village actually is saturated with artist studios, art museums, and galleries. Stay longer and one will find out various programs such as festivals, exhibitions, lectures, film screenings, experimental plays and others that are open to local artists as well as visitors. There is a full-fledged art world hidden here.

For artists who are working outside the Chinese official art system,<sup>1</sup> Songzhuang has long been seen as a hotbed for contemporary Chinese art and as a desirable place for an alternative life style. What is new, however, is its recent flourish as an officially recognized culture industry zone. With official sanction and investment, Songzhuang is now a well-institutionalized location for contemporary Chinese art production and it has been incorporated into Beijing's official tourist maps.<sup>2</sup> This recent transformation of Songzhuang Artist Village, from an alternative community to a mainstream location, resonates with the changing official attitude towards contemporary art and the opening up of culture for market mediations and consumptions in China since the beginning of the new century. This paper investigates the historical formation and recent transformation of the Songzhuang Artist Village and explores the impact of the changing economic climate on art production and administration in China.

### The Origin of the Songzhuang Artist Village

The formation of the Songzhuang Artist Village was related with the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, the first of its kind in China. This first artist village began to form in the late 1980s when several artists rent rooms and houses from local peasants in a rural village near Yuanmingyuan (the Summer Palace) in Beijing's northwest corner (figure 03). These former art graduates gave up their jobs in official institutions and became the first freelance artists in the history of the People's Republic of China. The location was chosen partially because of its proximity with several major universities in Beijing, from where the artists had easy access to new ideas and concerns circulating among intellectual communities.

By the beginning of the 1990s, Yuanmingyuan Artist Village had achieved a reputation of being an avant-garde enclave in China. Western diplomats, dealers and collectors began to frequent artists' residence, searching new Chinese art from these out-of-system or anti-mainstream artists. Media began to report on this unconventional social gathering, on young artists who lived a free and bohemian life style, and on their artistic activities. At its peak, Yuanmingyuan Artist Village boasted several hundreds of young romantics, including painters, poets and musicians, most of whom came because of their appreciation of the alternative cultural atmosphere prevailing in this community. The increasing reputation of this community, however, also drew many opportunists who came seeking overnight fame; in the meantime, it also brought the attention of the local authority, who responded by sending police to investigate artists living in the village.

It was in this context that Songzhuang Artist Village entered the historical stage. In 1994, some artists began looking for a new frontier as they planned to leave the now contaminated Yuanmingyuan.<sup>3</sup> Through an acquaintance, they discovered Xiaopu, a village in Songzhuang town in the eastern outskirts of Beijing.<sup>4</sup> The quiet rural environment fulfilled their need to stay close to Beijing, the culture and information center, but away from the city's hustle and

<sup>1</sup> Here I mean the art system that is dominated by the Chinese Artists Association, a national organization of artists, art historians, and critics. The organization has subordinate branches in every province across China and has maintained a centralized and hierarchical art system in China since 1949.

<sup>2</sup> For example, one will find information regarding the Songzhuang artist village at Beijing's major websites that introduce local culture and attractions such as <http://www.beijingpage.com/tourism/#excursions> and <http://www.beijing-visitor.com/index.php?cID=412&pID=1209>.

<sup>3</sup> Li Xianting, "I only Wanted to Live in a Countryside Courtyard," in *Black and White Songzhuang*, Zhao Tielin (Hainan Publishing House, 2003), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

bustle. The relatively convenient public transportation, spacious peasant courtyards, cheap housing price, and the idyllic countryside view all added to the appeal of this new location. Artists Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, Yue Mingjun, and Zhang Huiping were the first to settle down, together with the renowned art critic Li Xianting, the ardent supporter of avant-garde art in China since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Many more artists soon joined these founding members by either renting or purchasing vacant houses when in 1995 the Beijing authority banished the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village.

Taking lesson from its predecessor, the new artist community maintained a rather low profile without attracting much public attention in its early years. Their presence at beginning received lukewarm welcome from the head of the village government and local farmers, who were suspicious about these new residents but nonetheless valued the economic returns that they brought to the locals. Therefore, more artists were able to move in. Young people across China came and when the vacant houses in Xiaopu village were filled, they spread in neighboring villages. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Songzhuang town gathered all kinds of cultural professionals, including artists, poets, writers, designers, musicians, actors, and others and earned its reputation as a headquarter of contemporary Chinese art.

China in the 1990s was well on its way of opening up towards a commercial society. The emergence of Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and then Songzhuang Artist Village were byproducts of the new economic policy and the resulting political relaxation, even though their existence was the direct result of individuals seeking an alternative way of living and art making. The very fact that artists could decide their own place of residence and could choose to become freelance artists is itself a result of the ongoing social reform in China. To meet the demand of various new economic sectors, the government had greatly loosened its previous control over individual mobility and employment. The massive urbanization in major cities drew all kinds of labors and professionals, who travelled across China for better jobs and opportunities. Many young artists were among the pioneer social groups who moved in Beijing and began their career as a self-employed individual.

In the first half of the 1990s, however, the majority of Chinese people still had mistrust of individuals who were not local residents and who had no institutional affiliation. This mistrust certainly is a legacy of China's employment system in the Planned Economic Era, in which the state provided a job for everyone except self-employed peasants. State employees, be a teacher, doctor, construction worker, cashier, or artist (known as the cultural worker), all lived in the housing provided by their individual institutions (known as the work unit). Neighbors in the same building complex used to work for the same work unit and they often knew each other well. In this context, the presence of any outsider who did not work for a particular work unit would seem problematic and suspicious. Artists who moved in Beijing from other parts of China as freelance individuals were encountering this kind of social discrimination. They were called vagrants (*mangliu*-meaning people who float blindly) and were seen as source of potential threat to community safety and stability. This explains the general hostile attitude that local residents and police had for artists who gathered around Yuanmingyuan.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Songzhuang Artist Village rose in a different context. On the one hand, in 1994 Chinese government began reforming the socialist housing system.<sup>6</sup> Under this reform, work units gradually withdrew their responsibility of providing free housing for their employees and commercial housing started to take over. By the end of the 1990s, the traditional sense of community and neighborhood became increasingly irrelevant as wealth now determined where one would live. On the other hand, the integration of Chinese economy into the global economy and the market-oriented economic structure required the availability of a large number of population who could move freely from one city to another and even from China to other countries. People having the courage and freedom to move from one place to another have thus become an important new economic force. Beijing alone has drawn millions of migrant population for its massive urbanization, which greatly complicated the components of population there. In this context, freelance artists no longer seemed out of place and the term vagrant gradually fell in obsolete.

There were probably other factors that contributed to the final eviction of Yuanmingyuan Artist Village in 1995. In the eyes of the authorities, the potential subversive nature of art and culture created by these individuals outside of the official system was a risk that they were not ready to take yet. In particular, the close relationship between the Yuanmingyuan and the intellectual communities from the nearby universities posed a potential threat.<sup>7</sup> The involvement of foreign diplomats and press further complicated the situation, as they tended to promote these artists as dissidents who were rebellious against the authorities.<sup>8</sup> In comparison, the location of Songzhuang, the eastern suburb of Beijing, gives the new artist community an advantage, as it is far away from the leading intellectual communities in north-western part of the city. Throughout the 1990s, artists at Songzhuang seldom organized exhibitions or events that drew a wide public attention and their presence was almost invisible among the general public in China.

## A Local with Global Connections

Within the global contemporary art world, however, since its inception in 1994, Songzhuang had inherited the reputation of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village as a site of avant-garde and unofficial art. International Critics, curators, dealers, and collectors constantly visited Songzhuang seeking new Chinese art. The existence outside of the official art system that artists experienced here, to a great degree, was taken into favorable consideration when their art was examined. In terms of the actual artistic styles, Songzhuang artists varied as much

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<sup>6</sup> In 1994, the Chinese State Council issued a document titled "Decision to Deepen Housing Reform in Cities and Towns," in which it delineates the goal of establishing a market-oriented new housing system. In 1998, the State Council issued a new document that further promoted the commercialization and marketization of housing system. The two documents brought an end the welfare-oriented public housing distribution system that had been practiced for almost forty years in China. After that, work units nationwide stopped providing free housing for their employees and commercial housing system began to take over.

<sup>7</sup> One can be easily reminded of the democratic movement at the Tiananmen Square in 1989, in which university students played a major role.

<sup>8</sup> During the early 1990s, many exhibitions of these artists were shown in foreign embassies where the Chinese government had no control. Besides, artists were reported as rebellious heroes in mainstream media in the West such as the *New York Times Magazine* and *Art In America*. See Andrew Solomon, "Their Irony, Humor (and art) Can Save China," *The New York Times Magazine*, Dec 19, 1993; Lynn MacRitchie, "Report from Beijing: Precarious Paths on the Mainland," *Art in America*, vol.82 (1994): 51-53, 57.

as those living in other parts of China. Nonetheless, the dominant styles circulating in Songzhuang were associated with critic Li Xianting, who continued his support of artists working outside of the official art system in the 1990s through writing on their art and curating art exhibitions. His theorization of styles created by village artists (first at Yuanmingyuan and then Songzhuang) became the foundation of popular understanding of these artists in the international art world and contributed greatly to the success of their career.

Many young artists came to Songzhuang with a hope that their art would attract Li Xianting's attention and they could receive his theoretical and practical support.<sup>9</sup> Others came for the atmosphere and reputation of Songzhuang, since it had become a major place where international art professionals frequented. A great advantage that many artists came to enjoy as they moved in Songzhuang was to share information about the art market and international exhibitions. Hence, the "alternativeness" of Songzhuang, and of a few other artist villages alike, was merely in reference to the official art system in China; artists here were eagerly embracing the international art system and its culture. Indeed, the emergence of the Songzhuang Artist Village as an important location of contemporary art is not entirely a product of the market reform in China. Externally, Songzhuang benefited greatly from the new development happening in the international art world under the impact of globalization. In particular, the rise of contemporary Chinese art in the international art world in the same decade, as part of the development, greatly sustained the continuous existence of this artist village. It is a case of successful interaction between the global art mainstream and the marginalized local artistic practice, in which the local creatively utilizes its global connections as an alternative to bypass the undesirable local official system. Globalization here serves as a positive dynamism for the benefits of the local.

The rise of contemporary Chinese art, as part of the rise of non-Western art in general, is itself closely associated with the transforming landscape of the global contemporary art world since the 1990s in response to the rapid globalization. As pointed out by many scholars, with the formation of all kinds of transnational networks—cultural, technical, communicational, and travel and migration—globalization has prompted new approaches to making art and displaying art, new theories for explaining art and new perspectives for viewing art.<sup>10</sup> A major component of this transformation is the popularity of international art exhibitions, in the forms of art biennials and triennials, as an important cultural apparatus for contemporary art production. International art biennials/triennials worldwide, including the long established ones such as the Venice Biennale and the Sao Paulo Biennial and the more recent ones such as the Havana Biennale, the Kwangju Biennale, and the Manifesta, have become a major agency that defines, validates, and honors the most cutting edge artistic innovations. Accompanying the proliferation of international biennials/triennials, independent curators emerged as the new avant-garde figure of the art world and have exerted significant influence in the production and display of contemporary art as well as contemporary culture as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Li Xianting is also well known for his hospitality towards unestablished artists who came to him seeking help. He would offer his critique to their art, and when conditions allowed, he would even accommodate them temporarily.

<sup>10</sup> For more discussion, see Charlotte Bydler, *The Global ArtWorld Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2004) and Tim Griffin, "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition," *Artform*, vol.42, iss.3 (November 2003): 152-167.

<sup>11</sup> Responding to the rising importance of independent curators in the contemporary art world, some scholars have called them the "central player in the broader stage of global cultural politics; others have announced the coming of "the era of the curator." See Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering Identities: Art Curators and the Politics of Cul-

Independent curators refer to individuals who are not affiliated with any particular institution and who work independently as the mastermind of international exhibitions in initiating ideas, formulating themes, selecting artists, etc.<sup>12</sup> In their efforts to break down the old Euro-American centric canon and to encourage new artistic discourses, independent curators have introduced Asian art, African art, and Latin American art into the center of the global art world—various international biennials and triennials.

It was against this background in which international exhibitions and their curators have become the principal arbitrators of the contemporary art world that contemporary Chinese art was first introduced into the global art world. The 1993 Venice Biennale is historically significant in this regard, as it included fourteen Chinese artists, as a result of the collaborative work among several curators including Li Xianting.<sup>13</sup> It was the first time that contemporary Chinese art ever made a presence at an international biennial, and the participation in Venice Biennale, arguably the pinnacle of all international exhibitions, brought immediate attention to these artists. Political Pop, Cynical Realism, and Gaudy Art—terms coined by Li earlier that year—became circulating in the international art world; the main practitioners of these artistic styles such as Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, and Yue Mingjun came to be recognized as the representatives of contemporary Chinese art (figure 04). Many of them were subsequently invited to other prominent international exhibitions worldwide and their art soon became popular in the global art market.

The growing international visibility of Chinese artists served as a perfect recognition of Li Xianting's status as a leading figure in the Chinese contemporary art scene. Much attention, as well as enthusiastic reviews, was devoted to these Chinese artists who exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1993, which in turn brought up a widespread international passion for contemporary art from China.<sup>14</sup> Since several of these artists and particularly Li Xianting were associated with the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and then Songzhuang after the former's collapse, many international curators, dealers, and collectors regarded Songzhuang as a major destination for contemporary Chinese art. Their frequent visit had greatly boosted the reputation of Songzhuang as a leading contemporary artist community and had also created diverse networks between art professionals in China and various art institutions and agencies outside of China.

With the increasing networks of showing and selling art internationally, artists at Songzhuang could well afford maintaining their low profile within China. This helped shield Songzhuang off serious official attention and intervention. Simultaneously, as an important

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tural Presentation," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson & Sandy Nairne (London and New York, Routledge, 1996), 21-22 and Michael Brenson, "The Curator's Moment," *Art Journal*, vol.57, iss.4 (1998): 17.

<sup>12</sup> The first of its kind is generally believed to be the Switzerland historian Harald Szeemann, who practiced as independent curator as early as 1970s and conceived art exhibitions as a spiritual undertaking to generate alternative ways of organizing society. Daniel Birnbaum, "When Attitude Becomes Form: Daniel Birnbaum on Harald Szeemann," *Artforum International* v.43, no.10 (Summer 2005): 55.

<sup>13</sup> The 1993 Venice Biennale was directed by curator Achille Bonito Oliva; Li Xianting and Italian art historian Francesca dal Lago served as independent curators for selecting participating Chinese artists.

<sup>14</sup> A few examples here: Andrew Solomon, "Their Irony, Humor (and art) Can Save China," *The New York Times Magazine*, Dec 19, 1993; Orville Schell, "Chairman Mao as Pop Art," in *Mandate of Heaven: A New Generation of Entrepreneurs, Dissidents, Bohemians, and Technocrats Lays Claim to China's Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 279-292; Wang Guangyi: *La Grande Critique* (France: Galerie Bellefroid, 1993); and Lynn MacRitchie, "Report from Beijing: Precarious Paths on the Mainland," *Art in America*, vol.82 (1994): 51-53, 57.



alternative space outside of the official institutions in China, it has attracted artists and youthful romantics from all over China as an enclave where people could live freely and probably pursue pleasures that were not tolerated in regular social environments. It was this combined reputation of being a free and alternative place and being a land of international connections and opportunities that sustained the continuous expansion of this artist village. Over the years, cultural professionals of all kinds came to reside in Songzhuang and their presence further enhanced the cultural ambience of this countryside art community. The transnational networks have functioned as an important alternative for people here who seek personal career success without following the traditional approach in a very centralized and hierarchical official cultural system in China. From the perspective of art, this alternative contributed to the increasing dynamism of the Chinese art world and the diversity of artistic styles. In practice, this has provided individual artists with a higher degree of freedom, meaning they are free from the norms and customs of the official culture in China. Thus, these individuals could call themselves independent artists, of course not independent from the international art market, but from the Chinese official art system.

### **From Alternative to Mainstream**

Songzhuang Artist Village had maintained its autonomous identity, as an alternative and self-marginalized artist community outside of the mainstream Chinese art world for a whole decade. Then it was drawn into the national movement of culture industry. The launch of culture industry at the turn of the twenty-first century is a logical development of China's massive economic reform and its integration into the global economy. It also marks a beginning of the reform on cultural production and administration system in China, from a centralized and fixed system to a multifaceted and flexible one, in which local governments are given more autonomy in dealing with cultural affairs. With this new reform, culture is no longer exclusively employed as a tool for political ideologies or public education but also a flexible and desirable source for economic growth. In light of new official perception about culture, China has witnessed a growing political tolerance towards alternative cultural practices, suggesting a new era in terms of the relationship between culture and politics.

In the era of culture industry, various levels of government in China have come to view contemporary art communities in their juridical districts with a new perspective. In this new trend of harnessing cultural resources for economic development, Songzhuang town pioneered in its efforts to boost culture industry in the field of contemporary art. Since 2004, local officials have worked closely with artist residents and initiated a series of projects to facilitate the growth of the artist community. To announce the presence of artists, they established a bulletin board on the side of the main road that leads to Songzhuang (figure 05). The header on the board reads: "Welcome to Song Village Chinese Contemporary Artist Community."<sup>15</sup> Then in smaller fonts one reads a rather bold tone announcing the significance of Songzhuang artist community in comparison with other internationally renowned artist villages in France, Germany, and the USA. In both English and Chinese, this government established billboard authorizes the legal status of the artist community and acknowledges the importance of Songzhuang as an internationally recognized artist village. With this, the former vagrant

<sup>15</sup> Songzhuang could also be translated as Song Village since *zhuang* means village.

artists have become officially recognized professional artists, and their presence is now accepted and celebrated.

Following the official authorization, the development of Songzhuang has been spectacular. Since 2004, many organizations have been established, including Office of Cultural Development in 2004, Art Promotion Center in 2005, and Artists Group Reception Center in 2006. In 2006, Songzhuang also successfully obtained the Beijing municipal government's recognition as one of Beijing's first ten Culture and Creative Industry Clusters, among which Songzhuang was the largest in its size.<sup>16</sup> This is an achievement itself and also a significant drive for further development. By September 2009, the number of all kinds of cultural professionals living in Songzhuang was reported to reach 3000, while in 2004 it was around 300.<sup>17</sup> To house the sheer number of artists and other cultural professionals, numerous housing and studio complexes were built, together with galleries and museums that were designed to display and sell their work. This rural area is now not only saturated with art professionals, but also filled with art institutions. In 2004, the only landmark of Songzhuang Artist Village was the bulletin board on the road; by 2006 this road sign was overwhelmingly dwarfed by museums, galleries, and other structures that ostentatiously demonstrated the existence of such a booming artist village, including the conspicuous archway that leads to the main street of Xiaopu village [figure 07]. Established in 2005, this archway bears big writing "Songzhuang China," in Chinese and English. On the right side underneath it is a stylized road sign bearing the mark of "Songzhuang" at top, names of major local art institutions at middle, and a map at bottom (figure 08).

Among numerous newly constructed museums, galleries, and studio complexes is Songzhuang Art Museum, completed by Xiaopu Village government in 2006 [figure 09]. This modern architecture will be necessarily remembered as the first art museum in China that is ever constructed and owned by a rural village, the lowest administrative unit in China. The museum hired Li Xianting as its first director, and many exhibitions and series of lectures have been held in the space since its inauguration. Other institutions, such as Beijing Song Zhuang TS1 Contemporary Art Center, Shangshang Art Museum, Beijing East Zone Art Center, Songzhuang Private Art Museum, had all begun and completed their construction at various times during 2005 and 2006. Many more projects, either invested by local government or by domestic and international private agencies, were completed in 2007 and 2008.

Songzhuang town government also launched periodicals and book projects, such as *Zhongguo Yishu Mingzhen Songzhuang* [Chinese famous artistic town Songzhuang] and *Songzhuang Art* that trace the cultural history of Songzhuang and introduce its current artist community (figure 10). A few websites, either launched by the government or various local artist groups, have been functioning as major media that report and promote the products of this spectacularly rising contemporary art district.<sup>18</sup> In October 2005, Songzhuang government, in collaboration with local art professionals, initiated the Songzhuang Culture and Art Festival. It was a showcase of works by professional artists living in this region. Aiming to create a festival that could be experienced and shared by local peasant population, the organ-

<sup>16</sup> The information is from the official website of Tongzhou county, to which Songzhuang belongs.

<<http://www.bjtzzs.gov.cn/html/yuanqu/sz/yuanqudongtai/20090716/6787.html>> (accessed January 12, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Wu Huaguo, "Songzhuang Games: the Dilemma between the Creative Industry and Houses with Limited Property Rights," *Economic Information Daily*, September 11, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Here are some websites that feature exclusively Songzhuang Artist Village are <http://www.chinasongzhuang.cn/>, <http://www.songzhuang.org/>, <http://www.xp1888.com/>, and <http://www.songzhuangart.com/index-chs.html>.

izers arranged many activities to be held on the main street of Xiaopu. The Songzhuang Culture and Art Festival has been running annually ever since. In its second version in October 2006, the Festival was no longer limited to Songzhuang artists, but open to people from other parts of China as well as from abroad. To increase the scale and significance of the festival, the organizers designed more programs, including art show, musical performance, symposium and forum, and open studio project. Many newly built museum and gallery spaces became sites of art exhibits as they partook in the festival, while other activities still took place on the street.

As a result of the successive constructing and programming, Songzhuang is now packed with art institutions, art events, and art works. Mixed with ambitious local officials and incoming investors, established critics and curators, hopeful artists, and amazed local peasants who have no previous experiences of art, Songzhuang is creating a miracle in China. In a couple of years, this former rural town has become a growing national and global center for contemporary art. According to a recent statistics, Songzhuang now boasts eighty-eight galleries, twelve art museums, four comprehensive websites, and more than seventy small and middle-scale enterprises serving the needs of artists and their clients.<sup>19</sup> Every year, art professionals—either affiliated with mainstream institutions or self-employed—from all over China and abroad come and organize conferences, exhibitions, fairs, and other cultural activities in this artist village. In a sense, it has established itself as a mainstream location and has entered the scope of popular culture in China. As stated in the introduction section of this paper, the village is now on the official maps that Beijing offers to its visitors.

With the heavy presence of official programs, many of which are market-oriented, Songzhuang Artist Village has experienced a rapid process of institutionalization, mixed with a tendency of commercialization. The process has fundamentally transformed the nature of this artist village. Its original identity as an autonomous community of independent artists has been consumed in the official efforts to regulate and thus better employ the economic potential of this art community. Many local artists have actually been absorbed into various committees and offices led by local officials who are in charge of cultural affairs. It is therefore safe to argue that the increasing support of local government towards the artist community comes hand in hand with a higher degree of systematic control and regulation towards individual artists and their activities. In a sense, the new development at Songzhuang is a mark of the rapid institutionalization and commercialization happening in this art community, which has prospered at the expense of being absorbed into the mainstream official system.

## **Conclusion: A Model of Culture Industry**

The recent flourish of the artist community in Songzhuang town has brought spectacular economic returns to local residents and government, as wished by local officials who authorized all the programs to develop culture industry in this countryside. Xiaopu serves as the best example since it was the poorest village in Songzhuang town and the first among twenty-two villages in Songzhuang that accommodate artists.<sup>20</sup> Beginning as a small village with

<sup>19</sup> Wu Huaguo, "Songzhuang Games: the Dilemma between the Creative Industry and Houses with Limited Property Rights."

<sup>20</sup> In all there are forty-seven villages in Songzhuang town.

503 households of about 1300 permanent peasant residents, Xiaopu in 1993 estimated an annual personal income of \$439 (RMB 3000).<sup>21</sup> In 1998 with the coming of many artists and the rising of small business serving the needs of artists, the number rose to \$806 (RMB 5500).<sup>22</sup> Then a big jump of the annual personal disposable income occurred with the launch of the culture industry in Songzhuang and it reached \$2,096 (RMB143000) in 2009.<sup>23</sup> Accompanying the rise of personal income, the village government has also enjoyed rapid growth of fiscal revenue and has been able to greatly improve the living condition of the villagers with public projects such as new roads and streets, recreation centers, educational facilities, public sanitary facilities, and medical and welfare system. The improved living environment has contributed to the rising number of corporations, which has fundamentally transformed the economic structure of Xiaopu. Before 1999, the main economic mode in Xiaopu was agriculture, supported by two industries: a foundry and a chicken farm.<sup>24</sup> There are all gone now, replaced by more than one hundred and fifty small or mid-scale manufacturing and service industries, including auto parts, mechanical and electrical equipment, building and finishing materials, transportation and shipping, food supplies, clothing, frames, art supplies, printing, and many others.

As China as a whole is transforming itself from an agriculture society to an industrial one, what is going on at Xiaopu village and Songzhuang town at large bears special significance. Local officials involved in the process have gained nationwide recognition, in particular since economic achievement has now played a determinate role in evaluating the efficiency and success of the government. This economic-turn-political capital has also made local officials cultural celebrities. Through the constant coverage from mainstream media in China, this formerly unknown village and its equally unknown official administrators suddenly became well known culturally, economically, and politically. Besides, scholars from various fields have explored the indication and implication of Songzhuang phenomenon in relation to the development of third industry and green industry, the transformation of farmland into private and industrial land, new culture administration mode, investment and management, new rural life style, and such. In short, Songzhuang sets up a model for developing cultural industry and its significance resonates nationwide.

The story of Songzhuang is one with mixed efforts of economic, administrative, and marketing strategy of turning culture into capital. The new development here since 2004 demonstrates the increasing tolerance and flexibility of the Chinese government towards alternative culture and art in its response towards new economic needs. The transformation of the Songzhuang Artist Village shows the overwhelming power of the new government policy that is capable of turning an alternative and autonomous art community into a mainstream. This artist community has now become part of the new art establishment, in both institutional and market terms. Its initially self-marginalized and alternative existence is no longer meaningful since it is itself now a mainstream site for contemporary culture production.

<sup>21</sup> Qiao Runling, "Following the Tide, Low Cost Investment Pushes the Development of Industries in Small Towns—Inspirations from Beijing Songzhuang Town's Culture Industry," *Business China*, no. 4, 2009, P63-66.

<sup>22</sup> Hu Ruixian, "Thinking of Models of Transforming Collective-Owned Farmland into Land for Industrial Use," *Chinese Rural Economy*, iss.2 (2004): 20-25.

<sup>23</sup> Wu Huaguo, "Songzhuang Games: the Dilemma between the Creative Industry and Houses with Limited Property Rights."

<sup>24</sup> Meng Jing, "Xiaopu Geography," *Life Week*, November 24, 2008; Zeng Yan, "Things Grow: Songzhuang 1994-2000," *Life Week*, November 24, 2008.

With all the institutions of the art world, such as museums, galleries, associations, and centers, Songzhuang Artist Village has left behind its former identity as a naturally formed heaven of vagrant artists and has become an affirmative center for professional artists.

## Illustrations



Figure 01: The Location of Xiaopu Village in Beijing



Figure 02: Road Signs, Sculpture, and Poster Board in Xiaopu Village

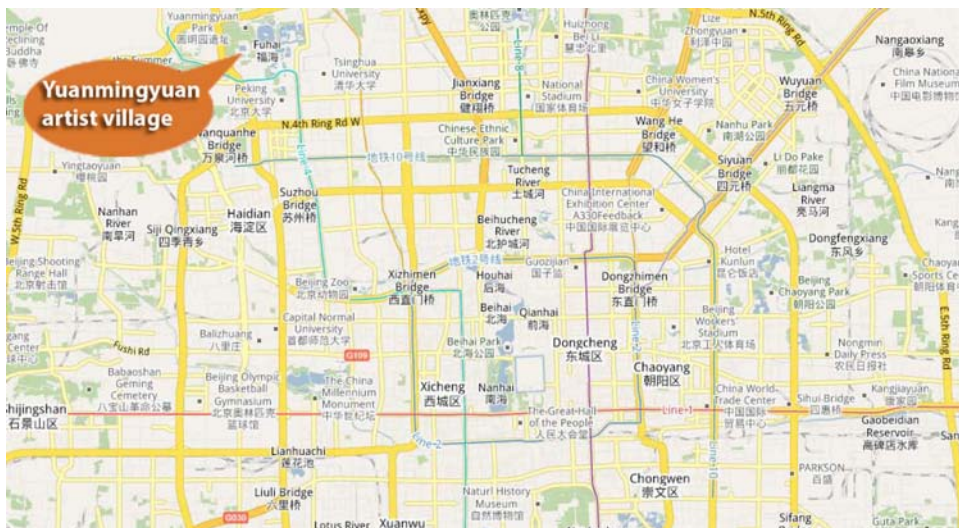


Figure 03: The Location of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village in Beijing



Figure 04: Fang Lijun, *Series II, No. 2*, 1992, Oil on Canvas



Figure 05: The Bulletin Board on the Road to Songzhuang Town with Headline “Welcome to [Song Village] Chinese Contemporary Artist Community





Figure 06: The Entrance View of the Artist Group Reception Center of Songzhuang



Figure 07: The Archway with “SongZhuang China” that Crosses over the Main Street Leading to Xiaopu Village



Figure 08: Road Sign by the Archway



Figure 09: Exterior View of the Songzhuang Art Museum



Figure 10: Left: Annually Published *Songzhuang Art*; Right: *Zhongguo Yishu Mingzhen Songzhuang* [Chinese Famous Artistic Town Songzhuang]

## About the Author

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Meiqin Wang, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of Asian art history at California State University Northridge specializing in modern and contemporary Chinese art. Her research interests also include contemporary art of the Asian world and international exhibitions. Her dissertation and published materials focus on the recent developments of contemporary art from China and their social, political, economic, and institutional implications in the context of globalization. She received her B.F.A. in art education and painting from the Fujian Teacher's University in Fuzhou and her master's degree in art history from the China Academy of Arts in Beijing. She received her doctorate degree from the State University of New York at Binghamton.