

## Policy, locality and networks in a cultural and creative countryside: The case of Jingdezhen, China

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### Introduction

This chapter develops a qualitative study of a small creative cluster based in Sanbao International Ceramic Art Village, Jingdezhen, a city known as the capital of Chinese porcelain and ceramics for over two thousand years (Dillon, 1992). This chapter will draw upon multiple sources including semi-structured interviews with artists, workers, managers, and mentors in the craft, ceramics and painting sectors in Sanbao to analyze how locality, relationship and community networks work in maintaining and developing this rural cultural and creative cluster. In addition, the work of other researchers, policy documents and media releases will be used to contribute to the analyses. Fieldwork and participatory observation within the village will add some specificities and texture to the theoretical skeleton, revealing some details and complexity of the evolving discourse on cultural and creative industries (CCIs) in China. Further, it enriches and contributes to the existing research on creative industries, given the dominant urban bias towards creative clusters research in recent years.



*Figure 1.* Sanbao Studio Area. Photo by Author 2014.

Sanbao means three treasures in Chinese, namely tea, bamboo and clay in Jingdezhen's case. Sanbao, a village regenerated from several derelict farmhouses 16 years ago,<sup>1</sup> is now home to hundreds of artists and workers. It has been developed into a self-sustaining ceramic art village with an international reputation. It consists of multiple ceramic studios and kilns, a gallery and museum for artists to make and display ceramics. It also functions as an intermediary agency offering upstream and downstream services, such as raw material supply, training and consulting, organizing forum and exhibitions. Additionally it hosts a UNESCO recognized research institute offering cultural immersion programmes and ceramic workshops in and around Sanbao for artists and enthusiasts from around the world. There is also hostel, restaurant, café and tea house, accommodating artists-in-residence, students and tourists.

Given Sanbao's scale and organizational structure, it is quite different from the dominant narratives of urban, often purpose-built creative clusters in China. This chapter aims to extend the existing research on CCIs beyond metropolitan agglomeration and urban clustering. Among interdisciplinary literature, there is a lot dealing with the clustering of creative activities, including studies of creative cities, creative labour and creative class. However, recent years have seen emerging cultural geography research which challenges the urban bias towards creative industries. The 'other' geographies and stories from the margins shifted the attention towards the broader view of locality and networks within and across creative clusters (see examples, Coe, 2000; Harvey, Hawkins, & Thomas, 2012; Luckman, 2012; Waite & Gibson, 2009). Research into Chinese rural CCIs are even fewer as researchers tend to look at tier-one and tier-two cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou; Suzhou, Hangzhou, Dalian and Ningbo (see examples, Keane, 2011, 2013; Montgomery, 2010).

### **CCIs in China: the problematic and the pragmatic**

Since the inception of the term creative industry in 1998 (DCMS, 1998), a plethora of policies and categorizations regarding CCIs have been raised, yet ambiguity and contests remain. The term is

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<sup>1</sup> The village used to have kilns and kaolin clay making workshops. It is close to the mountain which provides both clay and wood for ceramics-making and firing. However, with the advancement of technology and industrialization underwent in Jingdezhen city, craftspeople gradually moved out of the village to work for bigger companies and workshops which left their houses into ruin. This is not uncommon for the other villages around Jingdezhen.

derived from the Frankfurt School's *culture industry*, which referred to the industrialization of culture, whereas *cultural industries* focus on the industry dynamics of cultural production in capitalist economies (Flew, 2012). The term *creative industries* was initiated by the UK government as a response to the shift from a manufacturing economy to a knowledge-intensive, creative or experience economy (Keane, 2013), and sought to embrace more than the *cultural industries* discourse, emergent digital content industries. Creative industry discourse thus grew out of cultural industry and transcended its original cultural aspect, emphasizing the importance of individual creativity and innovation. In China, the term has gone through a series of developments in the academic and policy circles. The concept also inspired policy within many developing 'Asian Tiger' economies. Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan all came up with their own long-term plans tailored for their local economy (Kong, 2005).

Chinese policy normally starts from the top central government who develop overarching plans, followed by a series of regulations, which are often in broad terms that lack specification. This vagueness and ambiguity allows local governments to interpret and launch further reforms. Sometimes new ideas are fed in by relevant scholars and entrepreneurs through either formal consultation or other channels. Successful cases and entities will be used as models or demonstrations to showcase the policy in richer textures (Keane, 2013). The post-1978 'Open-up' reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping spread across various economic sectors. In Chinese cultural institutions and affairs, it first began with performing arts and then extended to other cultural and creative sectors. The ownership reform (privatization) of cultural industries was first conducted among state-owned cultural departments. From 2003, the focus for the cultural industries shifted from propaganda or reflections of socialist spiritual civilization to economic development with a rapid privatization of state-owned *cultural affairs* to privately owned *industry* or *enterprises*. The central government declared the official use of cultural industries as a key national task in their tenth Five-Year Plan. However it was not until 2006, that China officially endorsed 'creative' in its policy documents (Hui, 2006).

As creative industries discourse caught the attention of academics and policy makers in the West, technological innovations and cultural creativity were advocated for further policy development by

2011 in China. This does not mean China will break with its cultural past and only embrace individual creativity. Rather, this reflects the broader dynamics and tensions of cultural control or cultural nationalism and market liberalization. In China, the reconciliation term CCIs thus becomes a seemingly politically appropriate term to reflect the importance of both culture and creativity in a pragmatic way. Li Wuwei, an influential scholar and high-profile government official in China, has contended that creative industries and the creative economy are both driven by a dual engine of technological innovation and cultural creativity. CCIs follow a value logic which seeks value maximization. By exploiting human creativity, people can increase added value, both tangible and intangible (Keane, 2013).

Xi Jinping's new government reaffirmed cultural creativity and technology innovation as two drivers for the whole nation; this state-level strategy will continue to support the cultural aspect as culture is deemed to offer an edge in China's competition in the global market. The encompassing list of CCIs China proposed consists of tourism, crafts, industrial design and R&D among other sectors. Crafts and tourism are important components of the CCIs, which are more evident in developing countries, as it is easier for start-ups to profit since these require less technological innovation and thus less financial capital. This also brings up the very question of the definition of 'creativity' at stake here. Even though to define creativity and CCIs are not my purpose and certainly beyond the scope of this short chapter, a quick summary of the literature will be helpful to make sense of these debates. The God-given individual genius or elitism based notion of creativity has been criticized since the 1970s in Western cultural studies, cultural sociology, and other disciplines. The emphasis on the social nature of creativity holds that creativity is not produced with some pure raw material by the selected few, but is a human capacity which can be trained and nurtured (O'Connor, 2012). As Marx argued raw materials are not natural givens but socially constructed, the democratized creativity is about 'social intercourse, mutual respect, and the existence of other possibilities connecting creativity with social praxis' (Pang, 2012, p.44). This is very helpful in analyzing Sanbao's case, as this empirical research looks at particularly the connection and networks within Sanbao and how these foster creativity.

## Local policies

Sanbao is a representative case within China's CCIs as it is rural yet international. According to *Jingdezhen Daily*, the development of CCIs in Jingdezhen has reached an international and high-end stage. In 2010, the overall value of gross output of ceramic industry in Jingdezhen reached 16.02 billion RMB. In the first half of 2011 alone, ceramics exports totaled 89 million USD (JingdezhenDaily, 2011). The local government has followed the evolving discourse about CCIs and made a list of policies aiming to develop its local economy mainly based on manufacturing, ceramics and the tourism industry. It believes the revitalization of the capital of Chinese porcelain and ceramics will bring competitive advantage and generate economic (and social) value. Sanbao has been mentioned repeatedly in local policies as well as in many national, provincial and local media releases as a municipal CCI demonstration base.

Prior to 2008, the local policies connected to Sanbao were mainly about ceramic industry, tourism and cultural industry, in isolated terms. It was not until 2008, two years after the 11th Five-Year Plan was announced, that Sanbao was connected with creative industries. The next year, Jiangxi Provincial government decided to list Sanbao as one of the five CCI Demonstration Bases and later granted the official status of Sanbao Art Gallery.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, Sanbao finally got endorsed by the local government as both cultural and creative. In 2014, the municipal government issued an intellectual property right regulation to better support its ceramic industry. At the time of writing, the local government organized a high-profile forum named *Dialogue about Sanbao: Beautiful Nostalgia of the Millennium Porcelain Capital* to discuss the further development of Sanbao. The aim is to bring in investment and expertise to make Sanbao 'bigger and stronger'. It has created tension between the government and Sanbao due to the fear of turning Sanbao into one of those similar looking industrial creative zones based on a quintessentially urban playbook, similar cases can be found in other creative clusters in Chinese cities like Tianzi fang in Shanghai, 798 Art Zone in Beijing and Lijiang old town in Yunnan (Keane, 2013; Pang, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> Sanbao Art Gallery together with other four private-owned museums were officially approved in 2012. Sanbao was first built in 1995, which focuses on ceramic art making and research, cultural exchange and tourism. It also serves as one of the most important exchange hubs in Jingdezhen with a global focus. It became a member of IAC (UNESCO International Academy of Ceramics) in 2002.

## **Crafts-making as cultural and economic pillars**

Creative work in Sanbao reflects the convergent characteristics and functions of craft-making as a synergy of a cultural and natural endowment of uniquely place-specific raw materials, cultural heritage, traditions, and skills. It involves learning and experience, display and exhibition, as well as sale of handicrafts and a supporting hospitality industry. The production and skills acquired are often not only based on imitating and replicating traditional forms or patterns, but also on innovation which differentiate itself from its competitors. The cultural and spatial proximity and agglomeration in Sanbao provides an excellent environment and networks for the uncoded and apprenticeship-based tacit knowledge to accumulate and stimulate creativity.

As discussed earlier, the definition of CCIs has a strong economic focus. Given its broadness, it is important the empirical research to focus on detailed sub-sectors, crafts and ceramics in the case of this study in order to examine the cultural and social aspect alongside the mere economic focus. This study covers all aspects of the ceramic production chain: it includes the design and manufacture of ceramic objects and paintings, table wares, ornamentation and decorations which are strongly linked to creativity, contributing to both their aesthetic and utility value. The popularity of crafts and tourism also coincides with the reconstruction of many rural economies in a post-productivist era with rising demand for consumption-based leisure and entertainment (Connell & Gibson, 2004). In China today, more and more creative districts are being established, and people feel more comfortable staying and appreciating art works in diverse galleries as compared to a decade ago. Facilitated by government policies, creative tourism programmes in the countryside, such as ceramics classes in Jingdezhen and stitch-work seminars in Suzhou, are getting popular as part of the construction of new socialist countryside.

## **The Sanbao study**

Pratt (2000) referred to networks as complicated interdependencies which make a place convergent. Coe argues that 'networks of interpersonal relations' and 'the embeddedness and embodiment of economic processes' should be examined to study the agglomeration and regeneration of places (Coe, 2000, p. 394). Current spatial theory has acknowledged that there is a relevance between place and

both the collective and individualized aesthetic creativity (Drake, 2003; Harvey et al., 2012). The contention of this research is to further explore the role of locality and networks in prompting creativity in rural Sanbao. This study begins with the question of how the ceramic network was formed in Sanbao and to what extent the networked interactions and engagement foster creativity. It then examines the role of spatiality and to what extent locality creates and develops networks, relationships and community within and beyond this particular location. In seeking the answer to these questions, this empirical study conducted semi-structured interviews together with participatory observation from May 2014 to August 2015. A number of key people who setup, manage and maintain Sanbao were interviewed, including its founder, arts director and manager. Some artists-in-residence from China, Holland, South Korea and Italy were interviewed as well to investigate why Sanbao has an international reputation which differentiates itself from other creative clusters in Jingdezhen. Given the size of this art village, their significance is more evident than that of even key individuals in large metropolitan creative clusters. The qualitative data was then coded to create themes. I employ some key statements which best explain and illustrate the experience and thoughts of the respondents.

### **Brand and naming value: a millennium of ceramics history**

In Jingdezhen, a series of policies initiated by the local government have sought to maximize the significance of the city's long history and traditions of porcelain and ceramics to maintain the position as one of the leading production centres and market. Jingdezhen's myth is not only limited to China; the porcelain made there was called 'the white gold' and became a luxury item in Europe which dates back to Ming and Qing dynasties (Dillon, 1992; Gerritsen, 2011; Valenstein, 1989). The china mania was well documented in the historical fiction *The Arcanum* (Gleeson, 1998). It is not surprising for ceramic artists from around the world to exploit the reputational value of the long-established ceramic capital. In the ceramic community, Jingdezhen exemplifies quality in traditional fine Chinese porcelain and ceramics.

Most interviewees expressed that Sanbao is a perfect place to do porcelain and ceramics, not only because it sits within Jingdezhen, but also because of the way it is built and managed by the founder

Jianshen Li.<sup>3</sup> The atmosphere and environment, they all agree, provides a good reason for ceramicists from around the globe to come, exchange ideas and make ceramics. The living and working experience certainly is a crucial emotional and creative wellspring for them as both artists and human beings.

For example, Lee YoungMi came to Sanbao for the first time when she was a PhD student at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts. She studied ceramic sculpture in South Korea, but chose to settle down in Sanbao because of its porcelain history and culture. She has lived in Sanbao for eight years while teaching at the Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute. She likes Sanbao because of its complete and well-developed ceramic industry supply chain, starting from raw materials and moving through to firing and transportation, as well as training and education. Sanbao is perfect to do ‘real creative work’, she feels, as it is so dynamic yet quiet enough to focus on crafts. Enzo D’Agostino, an Italian artist, talks about his own experience with Sanbao as one which enables him to do creative work from a fresh perspective. He came to Jingdezhen because of its porcelain history and tradition. He spoke about how a sense of history has merged with a sense of raw materiality here, giving him a feeling of authenticity. He treats the clay as a surface, a carrier, and a medium for his conceptual art.

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<sup>3</sup> Jianshen Li, bought several rundown farmer houses in Sanbao in 1998 which have been developed into a small cultural and creative village in Jingdezhen. He had this idea when he was doing his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree at Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, the only university specifically focusing on Ceramics and Porcelain design and production in China. He later obtained another MFA degree from Alfred University, New York. He was enlightened by the concept of modernity and post-modernism which influenced his works from then on. Upon his graduation, he worked for Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute and founded Jingdezhen Sanbao Ceramic Institute. He made an award-winning documentary film named ‘*Tao Yao*’ (Tao kiln or ceramic kiln, awarded by Heritage Foundation and UNESCO, France) telling stories about the handmade techniques and traditions of ceramic ware in the traditional dragon wood-firing kiln. The houses in Sanbao were re-built in a traditional way which only used mud and wood. He started this art village with a ‘utopia dream’ to attract ceramic artists around the world to live and get inspired in this traditional and eco-friendly ceramic holy land. As an established ceramic artist, he started the neo-royal china ware (*xin guanyao*) and neo-pop (*xin minyao*) china ware movement. The works attracted the attention of the Forbidden City Palace in Beijing and went on exhibition there. From 2000 onwards, he combined both eastern and western cultures and aesthetic taste, stimulating audience to contemplate and re-evaluate the meaning of both classic and contemporary art. Instead of merely focusing on the perfection and refining of the shape and details, he features a small portion of traditional china ware’s characteristics and highlights the beauty of the ware itself through deconstructing and reconstructing strategies.





*Figure 2.* Lee YoungMi's unfinished ceramic sculptures in her Studio at Sanbao. Photo by Author 2014.

The interviews show evidence that some respondents find Sanbao's creative atmosphere stimulates their creativity. But it appears for others that locality is conceived not as important in terms of prompting creativity. Sanbao is attractive because of its cheap and comfortable idyllic environment where their family and friends stay as revealed by Director of Sanbao Art Gallery, oil painter, Xileng Cao.

However Wenying Li, Manager of Sanbao, even fears that this success might not be a good thing in the long run for Sanbao, as some so-called production-orientated artists will take advantage of the name of Jingdezhen without contributing anything valuable to it. But it is important to note that as Xileng Cao commented, the locality-based reputation and the tradition of ceramic making is not so significant for him to be more creative. The reason might be that he is not a ceramic artist, rather he did find creative stimulus in Sanbao's visual environment and nature as revealed below.

### **Spatiality as visual raw ingredients**

Reference has been made in the literature review to the place of landscape as a visual influence potentially enabling creativity. In the context of this study, a number of respondents made clear that the local visual environment has functioned as the wellspring of their creative crafts making. Xileng Cao explained he realizes Dao (truth or order) while living and working in Sanbao. His art project,

Wander & Image, reflects the natural order of the endless four seasons in Sanbao. Tea, mountains and trees were featured in the series. Obviously, very specific visual symbols and signs are used by Xileng Cao, but Jianshen Li talks more about his excitement at being immersed in the rural surroundings in Sanbao. For him it is not the specific seasons or mountains which inspire, rather it is the architecture and rural lifestyle that stimulates and shapes his craftmaking.

Overall, the interview data reveals that locality and spatiality can actually work as raw materials to prompt creativity. However, Xileng Cao suggested that any locality would do a similar thing. He pointed out that the inspiration of the natural order could have occurred anywhere, it just happened to be Sanbao in his case.

### **Intensive social and cultural networks**

Respondents also gave credit to the intensive social and cultural activities in Sanbao which provoke creativity. Jianshen Li emphasized the role of various forums, seminars and exhibitions which foster a mutual learning and sharing community. As a world famous porcelain and ceramic city, Jingdezhen has become a meeting point where dynamic cultures and novel ideas converge, and where locality serves as the venue for this to happen among which Sanbao is one of the most striking case. However, this does not mean that co-present locality is the only source for inspirational stimuli. What the respondents mean is not simply that it provides a collection of creative people; rather it is the engagement and meaning created between them that matters.

This echoes the conceptualization of Scott (2001, p. 12) regarding ‘the tendency of cities to engender multiplicity, flux, and unexpected event or experiences’. Sanbao proves that such synergies can also happen in a rural creative cluster. This evidently links back to the social and cultural networks and connections that have been built around Sanbao, sometimes in a very random and temporal fashion, such as during a visit, a seminar or an exhibition, which nonetheless can be of considerable value to the creative process.

### **Locality-specific creative community**

Among interdisciplinary literature, there are a body of works theorizing the relationship between locality and creativity. One interesting direction is the collective creativity contributed by the community of creative workers (Coe, 2000; Drake, 2003; Harvey et al., 2012; Pratt, 2000), as creativity is also, as previous reinforced, a socially constructed process. The research respondents acknowledged the influence of networks and the community of creative craftspeople in Sanbao on creativity, some of which has been reflected through their works. In some cases, this was channeled through a mutual learning community which fosters and promotes new ideas and novel perspectives. Enzo, for example, talks about how he got inspired by Chinese painting and calligraphy when learning and practicing it with local artists in his studio. His current ceramic art project is based on Chinese philosopher Mencius whom he draws a comparison with Socrates.

Wenyong Li looked back at what they did over the years to help create a culturally rich community which fosters mutual leaning and stimulates artists from around the world do ceramics in new ways. She mentioned that in Sanbao a lot of traditions and cultures are preserved, including some ceramics making techniques and tools. They frequently invite senior ceramic masters (*shifu*) to come to Sanbao and showcase their works and techniques. The museum and gallery offers a marketing and display platform. It also functions as an educational place, facilitating both temporary and long-term networks within the community. Lectures and seminars take place on a regular basis and are a haven for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. As Wenyong Li mentioned, there are no restrictions or particular obstacles for people from different backgrounds to form a new community or become part of the current community. But it is interesting to note that she also talked about some disconnections within this dynamic community where some senior engraving artists were not willing to cooperate with ceramists and painters. Whilst most of the participants advocate and agree that locality-based creative community prompts creativity, some artists hold slightly different ideas towards it. They prefer to stay and work in more isolated places where they can focus on their work. Even though most participants acknowledged the cooperation within the community, some also mentioned the competition and tensions within the community. But overall they believe competition actually facilitates creativity.

## **Concluding remarks**

This study employs semi-structured interviews followed by fieldwork to develop a qualitative case study of a small scale, rural-based creative cluster, Sanbao. It illustrates Sanbao's complicated interdependencies and points out how networks, both connections and disconnections, power up this place. This empirical research complements the existing creative place literature's urban-based creative clusters and agglomerations by providing empirical nuance from beyond cities and the metropolis. Although Sanbao may be a small and individual case, especially when compared to international cities like London and New York, it is important in that it contributes to the diversity of the research on CCIs. Furthermore, in ceramics circles, Sanbao is now a globally significant player.

Whilst Sanbao is located in the hidden hills of Jingdezhen, the engagement and interactions with the outside world extend far beyond its studios and museums, influencing artists, creative workers, students and educators at home and abroad. One implication this chapter might contribute is that it illustrates the ambiguity and 'structured uncertainty' of policy in CCIs in China (Keane, 2013, p. 22), which both helps and hinders the development of the creative industries. This comes from the fact that the ambiguity from the top actually leaves room for local governments to make policies that adapt to their own situations, while the unified and oversimplified policy lacks sufficient understanding of the politics embedded in disparate clusters and geographies. Particularly in Sanbao, the urban playbook was challenged for its assumed problems or potential a cluster may have in rural China.

The empirical data generated by this study extends our understanding of the way in which creative people respond to locality and spatiality. Using crafts as a sub-sector of CCIs in rural China, the themes provide evidence of how different places may offer different types of creativity stimuli, namely history and tradition, visual raw materials, social and cultural networks, brand and naming value, as well as place-based creative community. These all complement the lack of research into discovering and mapping the relationship between locality and creativity in rural clusters which challenges the traditional narrative of creative clusters, in terms of the forms, patterns and politics and thus possibilities (Harvey et al., 2012). Furthermore, the texture of creative work and life in Sanbao depicted a more recent and fresh picture of networks and community in a rural creative cluster, with

both connections and disconnections. It allows researchers and policy makers to reflect on the oversimplified understanding of CCIs. This echoes the critique on neglecting the contradictions, problems and limitations different CCIs may have in their specific scenarios, which is more evident and severe in rural areas (Bell & Jayne, 2010). Finally, it points to the danger of the unsophisticated development of CCIs which leads to the unquestioning transplantation of formulaic policy to disparate places and regions (Harvey et al., 2012). In order to notice and value the nuances of a particular cluster, further research is needed to explore the life and texture of creative clusters such as Sanbao. Before we go into detail mapping the cluster and policy initiatives, we need to abandon the presumption that certain policy blueprints will fit all places and clusters. It has been 16 years since the inception of Sanbao village, but the insights here are drawn from legacies that date back thousands of years in terms of its culture, history and creativity.

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