The Rhetoric and Reality of Culture-led Urban Regeneration - A Comparison of Beijing and Shanghai, China

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Abstract: It did not take long for the two Chinese megacities of Beijing and Shanghai to embrace the fashion of culture-led urban regeneration. Forerunner is the case of Beijing 798, wherein a semi-abandoned factory was gradually turns to the largest cluster of art production consumption. The process never runs smoothly as this zone was planned as high-tech industrial zone according to the comprehensive plan. During the past years, artists petitioned for preserving the factory, claiming that the preservation is significant in conserving historical buildings and sustaining the only and largest ‘artists’ village’. The cultural group in Shanghai is comparatively lucky as the municipal government promptly announced the plan of cultural rehabilitation of industrial buildings in 2004. Within 2 years, around two third of 80 listed ‘Creative Industrial Parks’ were converted from former dilapidated or abandoned industrial sites. Shanghai Sculpture Space is among the pioneers that are initiated by the government, who see the project as a model to demonstrate rehabilitation of heritage and to encourage the development of creative industry.

In both two cities, the process started when a cultural group moved to dilapidated industrial plants in the city, reusing them as studios. The spontaneous activities largely inspire many other parties, who soon find it beneficial to actively involve
themselves in the process. Nevertheless, authentic heritage conservation by professional ways of conservative interventions is, all of a sudden, advocated and appreciated widely, after dozens of years of fearless deconstruction and reconstruction in China.

Driven by global city making, both two cities see culture as a key to bolster a new economy and to deal with decayed urban sites. Meanwhile, differences are detectable due to the various natures and meanings of culture in localities and therefore different roles of culture assigned by the two municipal governments respectively. When Beijing has long claimed its orthodoxy in representing Chinese culture, taking art production as one pillar industry; Shanghai hardly hides its absorptive and sometimes eclectic nature, caring more on global standard of art consumption. This paper attempts to analyze the differences of the two culture-led regeneration projects, the spatial outputs of which stem from different cultural circumstances and, respond to power relationships of a variety of actors in the urban regimes.

Keywords: industrial heritage, culture-led regeneration, urban regimes, cultural industry, Public-private-partnership