

<CN>10

<CH>**Contemporary Chinese creatives as literati**

<AUT>Bjarke Liboriussen, Joaquin Lopez-Mugica, and Andrew White

<ABS>

<A>**Abstract**

<TXT>This chapter is based on primary research in the form of semi-structured interviews with Chinese photographers whose object of study is urban scenes in the city of Shanghai. These creatives tend to view themselves within China's long-established literati tradition, which contains both marginal positions and positions affiliated with centralized power (historically associated with the Southern and Northern Song periods respectively). The concept of Chinese creatives as literati will be linked to philosophical discussions on the nature of Chinese creativity and related discussions on China's place in the global knowledge economy. By self-identifying as literati, our interviewees embody the intertwining of state-sanctioned attempts at exploiting China's history and traditional culture, critical resistance towards rampant modernization, and attempts at finding Chinese ways of 'becoming contemporary', as one interviewee puts it. These creatives are comfortable with ambiguity, and thus offer an alternative philosophy to Western understandings of creative practice.

</ABS>

<A>**Introduction**

<TXT>The importation of the creative industries<sup>1</sup> policy and discourse in China in the early twenty-first century has both reinforced the government's desire to encourage more

innovation and amplified existing tensions over differing conceptions of creativity. Along with China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the adoption of policies to develop the creative industries has bolstered the nation's rapid modernization program. Producers of creative content in China have found themselves having to navigate difficult domestic and international policy domains, where restrictions on content and pressure to project a certain image of China at home have been complicated by a need to produce content which appeals to highly commercial global markets. As this chapter will demonstrate, attempts to resolve this tension have engendered a creative industries policy approach significantly different not only from other continents, but from the rest of Asia too. It is against this background we conducted interviews to explore how and why some of today's Chinese artists choose to identify themselves as 'literati'. The literati's 'purist' view of art opens up a space for critical reflection, from the perspective of the Chinese creative producer, on China's integration into global creative industries discourse and policy making. We begin the chapter with an overview of the complex historical background for some contemporary artists' self-identification as literati. We then engage with the interview material, highlighting how contemporary Chinese creatives navigate an increasingly globalized intellectual and artistic landscape. Finally, we reassess the role of the Chinese artist as literati by framing the figure within constantly developing creative industries policy and discourse.

### **<A>Historical background**

<TXT>The traditional Chinese view of artists as literati stems from longstanding, interconnected notions of literacy, education, and civilization. It is tempting to begin with the characteristics of Chinese language when tracing the roots of the literati tradition. Fluency in

Mandarin Chinese has never been a guarantee for successful verbal communication with the Chinese, since several of the dialects and vernaculars have so little in common with standard Mandarin (*putonghua*). The written language, however, carries meaning rather than sound, allowing communication across otherwise impregnable linguistic barriers. Since the written language has stayed essentially the same for more than 2000 years, '[t]he literate have thus always shared a common culture, uniting past and present through the educated people of all periods' (Rawson 2007b: 20).

Confucianism elevated writing to the status of one of the 'six arts' (Lee 1947: 489–90) and deepened a respect for literacy and education already present in Chinese culture (Xia 2014: 45). Writing grew into an art form, calligraphy: a mode of expression thought to convey not only the meaning of the written word but also the writer's personality. Farrer places the emergence of calligraphy somewhere in the Six Dynasties period (265–589) and lists a number of necessary conditions for this development:

<EXT>First, there had to be readily discernible difference between the best and worst examples. The craft had to be accorded esteem over and above its usefulness for communicating ideas or facts. Its practitioners also had to be highly regarded, and finally a canon had to be established so that each new generation had a starting point from which to develop and judge their own skills.

<ATT>(Farrer 2007: 92–3)

<TXT>Calligraphy was practiced and developed by literati, or 'scholar-officials' as they are sometimes called (Farrer 2007: 93). In keeping with Confucian thought, recruitment to this elite group gradually became institutionalized with a formal examination system. This move

from aristocracy to meritocracy culminated during the Tang dynasty (618–906) (Weber 1946: 424) with everyone who wanted to become ‘members of the central and local bureaucracies’ having to prove themselves in examinations that tested ‘their knowledge of the great writings of literature and philosophy of the past’ (Rawson 2007b: 21). From then on, China was essentially ruled through institutionalized meritocracy, at least in principle. Merit was measured in knowledge of officially sanctioned intellectual achievements of the past,<sup>2</sup> and (through calligraphy) expression of such knowledge had an artful dimension. The governing class of literati did not only find themselves on top of ‘an intellectual hierarchy through which the more educated ruled the less educated and the literate ruled the illiterate’ (Lee 1947: 491), they also took responsibility for passing wisdom and beauty on from generation to generation.

Another characteristic of the literati, a certain aloofness, comes to light by turning our attention from calligraphy to the closely related art form of painting. Early Chinese painting took several forms and served various functions but ‘all of the most highly respected latter Chinese painting evolved directly from calligraphy’ (Farrer 2007: 102). In the eleventh century, ‘a general theory of painting was created which elaborated for the first time a distinction between amateur “scholars” and professional “artisan” painters’ (Clunas 2009: 141). Su Shi (1037–1101) was the main theorist responsible for this conceptual development. Su listed a number of key characteristics of what he was the first to call ‘scholar’s painting’: ‘the relationship between such painting and the élite art of poetic composition, the disinterestedness of the true scholar-painter, who will never work for financial reward, and the superiority of spontaneous creation over laborious technique’ (Clunas 2009: 142).

Later, during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), what is today known as ‘literati painting’ ‘[emerged] as a distinct category’ (Rawson 2007a: 355), and the notion of the artist as a scholarly-minded amateur was applied within all categories of the arts. By the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, this artist persona had developed into a dominant ideal (Clunas 2009: 165),<sup>3</sup> an ideal artist who might very well exhibit an intellectualist ‘attitude of contempt and disgust toward military valor and physical work’ (Lee 1947: 490) as well as the ‘traditional Chinese literati disdain for commerce’ (Chen 2010: 38).

What effects did the upheavals of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries have on the notion of artists as literati? Chen insists that the literati ideal withstood ‘the modernization project that accompanied the Western imperialist invasion’ (Chen 2010: 265). Although ‘reform-minded Han literati were forced to adopt notions such as tolerance and equality’, adoption of such notions merely touched the surface of a deeply ingrained – and, in Chen’s analysis, deeply ‘racist’ – logic (Chen 2010: 265) that secured Han superiority. The literati might in their meritocratic way be telling you, from their vantage point at the top of the hierarchy, that you have not made it because you have not worked hard enough (Chen 2010: 265–6).

Also Gong (2012: 27) comments on the strength of traditional literati thinking and its deep Confucian roots. Noting a general shift from ‘culturalism’ to ‘economism’ in Chinese society, Gong (2012: 29) describes how a 1980s period of ‘cultural confidence of intellectuals’ has been followed by a period of marginalization triggered not only by the events of 1989 but also by ‘the lure of materialism [which is] irresistible, even to the most high-minded intellectuals’. That is not to say, however, that all ‘[c]ontemporary Chinese writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals’ with ‘a sense of social and cultural responsibility’ (Gong 2012: 31) need to shy away from consumerist contemporary society. Gong suggests a more complicated model at odds with the traditional dichotomy of economy and culture, and offers the author Yu Qiuyu (born 1946) as an example:

<EXT>In this postsocialist period when anti-intellectual commercialization is rampant, [Yu] embodies such elitist concepts as culture, tradition, and intellectual. Yet he himself is being commercialized and mediatized and becomes an intellectual celebrity precisely due to his well-packaged elitism.

<ATT> (Gong 2012: 56)

<TXT>\_CONT>Indeed, it could be argued that cultural intervention must take place ‘when economic development has become the predominant, single significant theme of contemporary Chinese society’ (Gong 2012: 31). To some extent, Gong’s argument resonates with the idea that the development of the creative industries in China holds potential for broader societal change (see, for example, Keane 2013: 38).

### <A>Ofoto

<TXT>If today’s Chinese artists refer to themselves as ‘literati’, they are, then, making claims to a complex and richly historically resonant position in Chinese society. Our case study of the contemporary literati relies on semi-structured interviews of photographers and curators, some of whom are associated with the Ofoto art gallery in M50, Moganshan Lu, one of Shanghai’s many so-called ‘creative clusters’. The interviews were conducted in English in Shanghai between 2013 and 2016. We do not necessarily find it useful to label all the artists interviewed as literati but respond, rather, to the need to rethink the fundamental meanings of the term in the contemporary art scene of China

One of us is part of a larger research project involving several case studies of contemporary art practice in China. For the purpose of this chapter, Ofoto was selected from this larger set

of cases through ‘elite-sampling’ (Bennett and Elman 2006), and supplementary interviews were then conducted with key respondents. The Ofoto respondents were singled out by virtue of their knowledge of the literati topic as well as their strong personal sense of Chinese identity, qualities confirmed by their Shanghai photographer peers. The literati position is, as suggested in the previous section, rooted in both Confucianist and Daoist moral virtues as opposed to market-oriented professionalism and the Communist Party’s cultural and ideological control of the arts. The case study elaborates on this ambiguous position of the literati in being critical of both the instrumentalism of the Western concept of creativity and the Chinese state restrictions on cultural content, while themselves adopting a position that many would view as similarly restrictive in its cultural conservatism.

#### **<A>The literati’s ambiguous position**

<TXT>Delving into the literati sensibility of some of Ofoto’s artists can enable one to develop a better understanding of the complex interplay of different artistic outlooks as they pertain in contemporary China. Luo Yongjing (born 1966) has attempted to capture this as: ‘to be literati is the one who is “smart” for the arts and literature, well-educated and most of all choosing to be ignorant about the trend and market’ (interview with Luo, September 21, 2015). Luo thus offers the literati role as an alternative to the logic of the propaganda or commodity system and also suggests that being a contemporary literati entails engagement with the literati as a historical figure. This engagement with the literati past is carried out both by individuals and through collective collaboration in Ofoto. Engagement with the literati past can sometimes be associated with cultural essentialism and neoconservative pride (Barme 1995). In this sense, and as stated above, while being a contemporary literati challenges both China’s ruling ideology and global capitalist discourses on the creative

industries, the literati position is deeply conservative. This is an ambiguity which will be explored in more detail below.

After more than a decade promoting photographic work in Shanghai, Ofoto founder and art director Yu Huang stresses the importance of the curators and their contribution to the artists' vision in contemporary art. This collaboration between curators and artists in Ofoto includes discourses that can be seen as part of artistic practice itself and also the creation of texts that inform and actively engage with a broad audience who are not always familiar with the artistic works, as Huang illustrates:

<EXT>We are just interested in good works in which the identity of the artists can easily be read in their images. Their message-making or their use of aesthetics devices are of vital importance in our selections. We believe that Ofoto started a platform of more pluralistic ideas in Chinese contemporary photography. Chinese traditional aesthetics and Western modes of expression can be explored.

<ATT>(Interview with Huang, September 22, 2015)

<TXT>In this quotation, Huang points to a space for comparative thinking that challenges the country's cultural policies which decry critical attempts to historicize the present (Wang 2004). Huang's curatorial position and traditional selection relies on both art history and locally based conditions, with artists and curators in Ofoto using a complex interplay of memory and contemporary 'anxiety' (of which more later) to revisit the past. Luo and Huang both also stress the importance of aesthetic autonomy and artists' strong Chinese subjectivities in their ways of excavating the Chinese past, which goes against the anti-traditional and collective iconography of the Socialist Realism period. Luo detaches



himself from external social reality, when he acknowledges that ‘the trend is more political, commercial, industrial and superficial. Ofoto is trying to stay away from this. It is working with the creative artists based on his individual vision, no matter if he is literati or possesses a Chinese style’ (interview with Luo, September 21, 2015). In this sense, we see in Luo’s call for a cultural memory derived partly from home-grown aesthetics and ethical meanings his eagerness to re-fashion both the past and present of Chinese artistic formations in Ofoto.

This is at odds with the government’s cultural agenda, which is more prone to accept nostalgic ‘consumable’ products than ‘historicised’ artworks (Dai and Chen 1997). The curatorial role in China started with the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art at the brink of the second millennium (Zhang 2003). Ofoto has looked for ways of strengthening the exchanges between artists and curators. The curatorial can be seen to aid the artistic community in China by introducing independent strategies and practices that differ from those of the Chinese Ministry of Culture. Ofoto’s curatorial approach also evades the dominant aesthetic of the transnational art-gallery system as much as possible in order to support an environment of multiple spatial and temporal conditions for diverse audiences’ reception of art, where located discursive contexts and narratives are also taken into consideration (Gladston 2016). The ultimate goal, according to another Ofoto photographer, Zhu Hao (born 1969), is to foster a multiplicity of artistic expressions and interactions to enrich the gallery experience as much as possible:

<EXT>In one of my group exhibitions named ‘Misinterpretation’ (2009), an important number of Chinese styles and motifs were closely working together, where it was possible to find sameness and differences, which somewhat tells what Ofoto is

about. I do not think Chinese contemporary artists can return to the same type of creation as the literati, but in many of their visions of the urban landscapes, such as *Feng Shui* [it literally means ‘Wind Water’] skyscrapers can be visually registered as mountains, and cars which are running through roads can be visualised as rivers. So as the Song literati [960–1279], we could also find both aloofness and worldliness in today’s cities.

<ATT>(Interview with Hao, June 22, 2016)

<TXT>This dynamism between artist and curator can be found throughout Luo’s artistic work, which draws inspiration from his own Chinese identity in order to relate to the socio-political context of late socialist China. Luo uses mainly photography to unravel the hidden beauties of Chinese daily life. His photographic approach is not conceptual, as Huang asserts: ‘Luo has the camera in his eye, a third eye, and from there, he creates his own poetic worlds while pointing at some objects’ (interview with Huang, September 22, 2015). The focus on the inner poetic qualities rather than on external reality can be interpreted as the result of a social and cultural environment that suppresses the expression of feelings and affection among artists. His visual exploration not only focuses on history and photography as narrative but also on local motifs and modes of remembering in the context of Chinese modernity. Furthermore, Luo also aesthetically explores political imagination in Confucian terms, in which the individual and the country interact with each other.<sup>4</sup> Added to this is Luo’s assertion that to share memories is an effective means of developing creativity, a further indication of how artistic critique in China often tends to mine traditional cultural resources.

Gao (2011: 115) also suggests that this historical or philosophical subjectivity can be connected with Chinese historical or literary forms to return to ‘cultural nationalism and fundamentalism’ as an ‘identified memory’. However, this return to the nativist China or the so-called *bentu* is also arguably akin to what Gao (2011: 110) considers an ‘unidentified memory’ that can emerge with its engagement with the contemporary art market. For Gao (2011: 115), Chinese contemporary art is conceived by its indigenous cultural forms and styles as a mixture of local *bentu* and liberal Westernized ‘global *bentu*’. These contradictory behaviors both manifest latent rigid and more fluid etiquettes to retrieve the past and unfold counter-narratives of Chinese modernity. Adopting a subtly different position on the concept of *bentu*, Luo (interview, September 21, 2015) proposes that this has been rooted in Confucian and Daoist impulses, as an emancipatory vision uncontaminated by either Western liberalism or Chinese socialism.

#### **<A>Ofoto’s organizational culture**

<TXT>An important aspect of the Chinese creative industries is the way in which the government directs activity towards officially designated clusters. While these types of clusters and artistic quarters are also prominent in Western cities, in China they are more usually linked to the wider government-driven program of the industrialization of culture:

<EXT>The idea that industrial models can be applied to cultural production recalls the kind of thinking that prevailed in the *tiyong* era of the nineteenth century. The transformation of science parks into creative incubators and the gentrification of disused industrial space is evidence of this mentality. There is a tendency on the part of many officials, supported by developers, to argue that the

construction of cultural parks will attract ‘talent’. In a nation where talent was traditionally identified from above: through the imperial examination process prior to 1911 and by the ability to integrate Marxist principles into artwork under revolutionary socialism, the idea that creativity emerges from the grassroots is somewhat foreign.

<ATT>(Keane 2011: 29–30)

<TXT\_CONT>Providing incentives for creative workers to work within these clusters was a means by which the Chinese government could continue to exert a measure of control on content in an environment where direct control of cultural institutions was being loosened as a result of marketization in the 1980s and 1990s (White and Xu 2012: 250).

While this appears at first sight as an approach specifically associated with the Communist Party’s way of dealing with the complexities of its opening up policy, the cluster model can be seen as in some way reflective of traditional ways of working in China. This can be illustrated in the example of Ofoto, whose organizational system accords with a traditional Chinese detachment from politics and commerce historically embodied, for example, in the Southern literati<sup>5</sup> during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Ofoto is particularly keen to encourage discussions about conceptions of aesthetics and culture in China, as Huang explains:

<EXT>Ofoto cultural workers are people who are enthusiastic about what they and we do. Our backroom, it is a special area for our tea practices, our tables and chairs full of food in lunch times represent our sharing spaces, in which we talk about culture and aesthetic ideas on photography or calligraphy. We try to spend as much

time as possible together, and the level of trust and loyalty that we have achieved is rewarding for me and the other cultural workers.

<ATT>(Interview with Huang, September 22, 2015)

<TXT\_CONT>For Huang, these discussions impact on the working practices of the literati, where work time becomes a cyclical reenactment of the past to create an organizational culture resistant to Westernized forms of market-oriented professionalism. Huang goes on to claim that:

<EXT>Despite the fact that the cultural industries are a Western concept, in Ofoto we have adopted the needs to our own ways of doing things. For example, the idea of horizontal forms of work can also be translated into our creative infrastructure which connects curatorial professionals and artists to collaborate and spend as much time as possible together at work, but also during our ‘tea time’. Most of the cultural workers in Ofoto have been in Ofoto for more than a decade, I think, this form of collaboration that can be very Chinese, works for us.

<ATT>(Interview with Huang, September 22, 2015)

<TXT>Although, the Shanghainese freelance photographer Ni Weihua (born 1968) does not extrapolate Ofoto’s horizontal and collaborative relationships in other artist studios or clusters, he does however claim that:

<EXT>Ofoto is unique in its manner of reinforcing the humanist values of Chinese traditional art and culture, in the sense that it attempts to know its own boundaries. Thus, it opens up the possibility to produce new innovative forms and languages. Like Ofoto, many other art galleries are examples of harmony in Chinese art management. Art directors, curators and artists know where the vertical hierarchies are, but in their day-to-day basis those links can become horizontal and flexible. There is a kind of formal and informal culture that is respected by Chinese creative workers.

<ATT>(Interview with Ni, May 20, 2016)

<TXT\_CONT>Clusters in mainland China are thus organized in a more systematic way than the bottom-up ideal (not always realized) which predominates in the US and UK, from where the cluster model originates. Nonetheless, clusters not only subvert Western ideas of market-oriented professionalism but also enable local experimentation to flourish in ways that confound narratives of the party-state using these organizational forms to impose uniformity on the cultural sector (White and Xu 2012: 253–4).

### <A>**The significance of ‘generational’ knowledge**

<TXT>An aspect of the contemporary artistic scene in China where organization and forms of knowledge intersect is in ‘generational’ knowledge. For Luo, old and new skills and techniques, whether drawn from Chinese or Western traditions or innovations, are necessary and vital conditions for good artwork:

<EXT>We try mainly to find young and new artists instead of the established ones. Artists are different from one another. Only we choose for Ofoto the artists who care a lot about Chinese culture and the literati spirit. They can be old like me or young as Yang Yongliang [born 1980, an artist famous in China for his digital landscape compositions]. A good artist should be aware of all kinds of technologies, old or new and choose to use the ones that best express his ideas. Our selection of artwork is very simple: good or bad.

<ATT>(Interview with Luo, September 21, 2015)

<TXT>The labelling of an artist born in 1980 as ‘young’ is significant in the Chinese context where public discourse around the social and cultural effects of the country’s rapid economic changes often take generational difference as its starting point. As the first generation to grow up in the ‘new China’ of material wealth, the so-called *balinghou* generation (literally eight-zero-after, that is, those born 1980–89) is both envied and chastised by older generations for embodying a new attitude of carefree consumerism (Liboriussen 2016). In some parts of the Chinese creative industries, *balinghou* (as well as younger) creative workers are expected to be expert users of the digital tools and technologies seen as emblematic of their generation (Liboriussen 2015). In the above quotation, Luo refuses this generational logic by insisting that the practitioner’s choice of tools (of ‘technologies, old or new’) transcends it – yet he also insists that the artists with whom he associates himself should somehow connect themselves with the past, that they should ‘care a lot about Chinese culture and the literati spirit’ (interview with Luo, September 21, 2015). In this sense, the young artist Yang Yongliang (born 1980) emphasizes that the work of the literati creator can be continued in the present, and be actualized with digital technologies:

<EXT>When I was a child, I learned Chinese traditional painting and calligraphy for about ten years. Later on, I studied visual communication at the University, where I began to touch digital photography and multimedia technology, and all types of softwares. Even if I was deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture such as *Shanshui* painting, a form of Chinese landscape painting, technology helped me to revive this conventional vision. My digital techniques allowed me to transfer the old Chinese *Shanshui* landscape into the rapid and derelict urban changes of Shanghai and connect it to contemporary society.

<ATT>(Interview with Yang, July 19, 2016)

<TXT\_CONT>Part of this literati spirit is artistic assessment that ignores the commodity values of the market and instead embraces the aspects of the literati class which encounter truth virtues between modernity and tradition in which the diversification and professionalization of the production and distribution of art may come to terms with a critical literati and elitist-intellectual management position.

Luo also acts as an official-scholar whose public position, as Professor of Photography at the Shanghai Institute of Design, could be said to establish parallels with the interventionist critical spirit of official-literati. This hegemonic visual array responds to a:

<EXT>[post-]socialist realism [which] was so reified as to become the classicism of Chinese culture for decades. In its official dogmatism and formulaic emotion, it



abandoned realism's original edginess, earthiness, and engagement with socio-historical reality. It forgot the lived experience for ordinary people on the ground.

<ATT>(Wang 2008: 498)

<TXT>Luo's literati position mediates between intervention (Confucianism) and non-intervention (Daoism) (Ortis 2011: 4). Luo seems to situate himself closer to the non-interventionist humanistic side of the literati, when he says 'it is the attitude towards life that counts. It does not matter if you make a living with art or other professions; neither are you rich nor poor' (interview with Luo, June 21, 2016). Luo's invisible world could be seen through his compositional sophistication and his search for harmony and interaction between perfection and less perfect qualities of everyday life:

<EXT>The core of literati in an art piece is something invisible. It is in the artist's blood. It is like a taste in a dish, the poetic in the words or the melody in a song. You can sense but you cannot see, you can feel but you can't tell.

<ATT>(Interview with Luo, September 21, 2015)

<TXT>This citation may acknowledge the importance of the literati's conception of creativity having a mystique that cannot be comprehended by the layperson, a deliberate distancing of the literati from the social while providing a means by which the official ideology of art and culture can be challenged. This mode of thought fits with the original conceptualization of creativity – as a gift bestowed to geniuses – in the Western tradition

(McIntyre 2012) but jars with more recent developments of the concept. The dominant view among Western researchers today is that although the cultural impact of their work might obviously differ, the artist's and the layperson's creativity are the same in terms of underlying psychological mechanisms (for example, Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Boden 2004). This conceptualization of creativity fits into political discourses that encourage a shift towards a more 'creative' economy as well as discourses that encourage creativity as a goal of education for the benefit of the individual learner in terms of both employability and personal fulfilment. Informed by the literati ideal, however, the Ofoto respondents' view of creativity as something in 'the artist's blood' resolutely insists on an elitist link between creativity and professional practice, as well as a clear separation of professional and non-professional practices.

### **<A>The literati and the Chinese creative industries**

<TXT>Having heard from the artists themselves, we now reassess the role of the Chinese artist as literati in light of the 'creative industries' discourse and policy, which for the past decade has attempted to reshape the place of art and artists in Chinese society. In order to perform this reassessment efficiently, we return once more to the historical background, picking up from the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949.

The most striking features of the literati are its self-understanding as an elite caste of artists as well as its disdain for commerce. The post-1949 period has thus been a challenging time for Chinese artists of this ilk. From 1949 to the beginnings of the so-called reform and opening-up period in 1978, artists were forced to shed their hitherto elite status as they were co-opted into the state system to produce social-realist art. While there was a short period from around 1978 to 1989<sup>6</sup> where artists could experiment freely largely outside both the

political system and global markets, since the early 1990s artists have been constrained both by domestic restrictions on ‘political’ content and the pressure to compete in commercial environments where rising property prices and withdrawal of state subsidies have made their working lives more precarious. Wang (2012: 223) alludes to the existential crisis that this has induced in many artists in his suggestion that the Chinese art world is in a perpetual state of ‘anxiety’.

In this century, this sense of anxiety has been amplified by China’s enthusiastic adoption of global discourses and associated policies on the creative industries. This not only is an affront to the literati’s notions of commerce-free art, but also challenges its authority as arbiter of artistic value. For, more so than the adoption of other economic policies from overseas, the importation of Western ideas about creativity and the creative industries has caused profound disruption in China’s view of itself, exposing contradictions that the state appears unable to resolve. Chinese officials were not naïve about the likely effects of this profound policy shift, which explains why they initially rejected the term ‘creativity’ (Keane 2011: 1). But concerns that China needed to ‘catch up’ to the more creative economies and the fact that the country has a large cultural deficit – a sense of inadequacy exacerbated by the success of Japan and Korea in the creative industries – led to the acceptance that creativity should be encouraged in the Chinese economy (Keane 2011).

The Chinese government’s conception of creativity is, however, radically different from the way in which the term is understood in the Western world, from where it originated. It is less associated with the notion of individual genius and more with collective forms of creativity, especially where this relates to government policies on innovation and creative clusters.

While it is true to say that the Romantic idea of individual genius upon which the discourse of creativity is based is challenged in the West, it still remains the guiding philosophy of the creative industries in that part of the world (Pang 2012: 50). It is also linked to a particularly

Western understanding of modernity, which in the UK, where the term ‘creative industries’ was first used as basis of policy support for the industries so described, is associated with the idea of post-industrialism (Keane 2011: 19). This is an attractive idea for Chinese policy makers, particularly in the way in which it underscores their efforts to improve soft power through city branding strategies. Art places a key role in that and, notwithstanding some of our own arguments about the critical role of the literati in the development of the Chinese creative industries, it is claimed that many artists are comfortable in contributing to the branding of the city (Pang 2012: 138, 157).

It might be argued that a pragmatic capture of the term ‘creative industries’ would enable Chinese policy makers to pursue other goals which are more suitable for China’s stage of development. This can be seen in relation to the eliding of creativity with innovation in the eyes of Chinese scholars and policy makers, with influential Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Professor Zhang identifying the synergies between the development of what are usually termed in China as the cultural industries with the development of a national innovation system (Flew 2012: 49); this is part of a wider official program to make China an ‘innovative nation’ by 2020 (Keane 2011: 1).

All this need not be threatening to Chinese artists, because after all there is no reason why encouraging greater innovation in industry is necessarily incompatible with promoting creativity in the arts. However, partly for censorious reasons but also because of its concern about China’s significant trade deficit in cultural products, Chinese policy makers view culture as a resource that can be monetized rather than a means by which artists will exercise their free expression. This means that Chinese artists are subject to the same commercial pressures as their counterparts in the Western world without having similar degrees of latitude to those who want to shun commercialism and offer critiques of the societies in which they live. Nonetheless, as demonstrated above, the literati caste of artists has carved

out a space for critique, even if it is an ambiguous form of critique. And while some scholars are skeptical about contemporary Chinese artists' capacity for and willingness to critique (Pang 2012: 157; Wang 2012: 227), Cheung's (2014: 226) study of 12 contemporary Chinese artists identifies criticism of government restrictions as well as of China's enthusiastic embrace of modernity. That many of these critical works of art use traditional Chinese motifs to emphasize their points about the social cost of China's rapid modernization (Cheung 2014: 239) is a further indication that the official discourse of cultural and creative industries in the arts has been unable to prevent the literati tradition from becoming a rallying point for those who seek an alternative vision of how creativity might function in China.

But, as if to illustrate the ambiguity inherent in the literati's seeming oscillation between critique and conservatism, the policy framework for the Chinese creative industries is based on modes of production which are similar to those in the literati tradition. In order for the concept of creativity to be accepted in China it had to be conceptualized as a collective rather than individual form. The manifestation of this thinking was the creative cluster (*chuangyi jijuqu*), an industrial form which proliferates in many Chinese cities. As we have seen earlier with the observations of how the literati caste reproduced itself through the imperial examination system and how they are keeping their collective knowledge alive through the type of interactions which are taking place in shared spaces such as Ofoto, the Chinese cluster model could have been designed with these artists in mind. The earlier mentioned notion of the literati passing their knowledge down through succeeding generations is similar to the idea of Marshall ([1920] 1997), the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century economist who, in his studies of the building up of generational knowledge in industrial sectors of northern England, provided the inspiration for the Western model of the creative cluster. In this sense, these modern-day industrial cluster models could be said to be China's way of

adapting creative industries policy to something compatible with its own philosophical tradition, a tradition in which the literati play a prominent role.

## **<A>Conclusion**

<TXT>Historically steeped in Confucian, meritocratic values, and Daoist ideals of reclusiveness, the literati artist is a quintessentially Chinese figure. In our Ofoto case study, interviewees demonstrated one way of reconciling this complex figure of the past with a contemporary need for innovation in both artistic and organizational aspects as a means of becoming a successful member of what is today labelled ‘the creative industries’. By aligning themselves with the literati position, as they themselves interpreted it, the interviewees discovered new possibilities of balancing the commercial with the aesthetic and critical. That balancing act allowed them to carve out their own spaces for both individual and collaborative practices and thinking somewhat beyond the demands of both the global marketplace and the political restrictions of the one-party state. The collaborative aspect of their practices and thinking are perhaps the most striking, as it reaffirms a special Chinese collectivist understanding of creativity while providing a potential space for artists for social critique. The creative cluster is the most visible and most frequently used official tool for driving the Chinese creative industries forward. To see the notion of the literati resurface in the midst of China’s creative industries boom, and to see it resurface within an institution that is so central to official creative industries policies, is a thought-provoking and timely reminder that no matter how Western the idea of creativity is, China has the capacity to both integrate and transform international impulses. Moving forward, scholarly attention to the implementation and impact of creative industries policy in China needs to pay attention to how such policy developments are not merely applied to China but also trigger complex

cultural reactions within the country, as exemplified by the resurfacing and reinterpretation of the literati role.

## <A>References

<BIB>Barme, G. R. (1995) To screw foreigners is patriotic: China's avant-garde nationalist.

*The China Journal*, 34: 209–34.

Bennett, A. and Elman, C. (2006) Qualitative research: recent developments in case study methods. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9: 455–76.

Boden, M. A. (2004) *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Chen, K.-H. (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Cheung, M. (2014) Contemporary Chinese art and the dream of glocalisation. *Social Semiotics*, 24(2): 225–42.

Clunas, C. (2009) *Art in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996) *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Dai, J. and Chen, J. T. H. (1997) Imagined nostalgia. *Boundary*, 24(3): 143–61.

Farrer, A. (2007) Calligraphy and painting in official life. In Rawson, J. (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*. London: The British Museum Press, pp. 84–133.

Flew, T. (2012) *The Creative Industries: Culture and Policy*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Gao, S. (2011) *A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China: Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics*. Bielefeld.

- Gladston, P. (2016) *Deconstructing Contemporary Chinese Art: Selected Critical Writings and Conversations, 2007–2014*. Berlin: Springer.
- Gong, H. (2012) *Uneven Modernity: Literature, Film, and Intellectual Discourse in Postsocialist China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press.
- Gu, X. (2014) Creative industries, creative clusters and cultural policy in Shanghai. In Lee, H.-K. and Lim, L. (eds), *Cultural Policies in East Asia: Dynamics between the State, Arts and Creative Industries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 174–92.
- Keane, M. (2011) *China's New Creative Clusters: Governance, Human Capital and Investment*. London: Routledge.
- Keane, M. (2013) *Creative Industries in China: Art, Design and Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Keane, M. and Zhao, E. J. (2014) The reform of the cultural system: culture, creativity and innovation in China. In Lee, H.-K. and Lim, L. (eds), *Cultural Policies in East Asia: Dynamics between the State, Arts and Creative Industries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 155–73.
- Larson, W. (1989) Realism, modernism, and the anti-“Spiritual Pollution” campaign in China’. *Modern China*, 15(1): 37–71.
- Lee, S.-C. (1947) Intelligentsia of China. *American Journal of Sociology*, 52: 489–97.
- Li, Z. (1999) *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, trans. L. Gong. Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers.



- Liboriussen, B. (2015) (Digital) tools as professional and generational identity badges in the Chinese creative industries. *Convergence*, 21(4): 423–36.
- Liboriussen, B. (2016) Balinghou and qilinghou: generational difference and creativity. In Keane, M. (ed.), *Handbook of Cultural Industries in China*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 64–79.
- Marshall, A. ([1920] 1997) *Principles of Economics*, 8th edition. Amherst: Prometheus Books.
- McIntyre, P. (2012) *Creativity and Cultural Production: Issues for Media Practice*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ortis, J. (2011) The art of being: a study of the relationship between Daoism and art. *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*, 11: 1–14.
- Pang, L. (2012) *Creativity and its Discontents: China's Creative Industries and Intellectual Property Rights Offenses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rawson, J. (2007a) Glossaries. In Rawson, J. (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*. London: The British Museum Press, pp. 347–70.
- Rawson, J. (2007b) Introduction. In Rawson, J. (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*. London: The British Museum Press, pp. 13–43.
- Wang, B. (2004) *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wang, B. (2008) In search of real-life images in China: realism in the age of spectacle. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17(56): 497–512.
- Wang, C. (2012) The art of anxiety: China's social transformation and the uncertain reception of Chinese contemporary art. *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 11(2–3): 222–9.

Weber, M. (1946) The Chinese literati. Trans, H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills. In Gerth, H. H. and Mills, C. W. (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 416–44.

White, A. and Xu, S. (2012) A critique of China's cultural policy and the development of its cultural and creative industries: the case of Shanghai. *Cultural Trends*, 21(3): 249–57.

Xia, G. (2014) China as a 'civilization-state': a historical and comparative interpretation. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 140: 43–7.

Zhang, Q. (2003) Chinese curators: directed but lacking a path. Trans. P. Bloom. In Li, A. (ed.), *Critics' Criticisms and Self-Criticisms*. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, pp. 198–204.

<Move Notes to before References>

#### <A>Notes

---

<NT>1 We use the term the 'creative industries' here because it is the most common way of referring to them internationally. However, as we will explain later, sensitivity to the word 'creative' in China means that these same industries are often referred to as the 'cultural and creative industries' in that country (Gu 2014: 177–81; Keane and Zhao 2014: 156, 164–5) or, as some of our interviewees expressed it, the 'cultural industries'. We have mainly used the creative industries in this chapter but occasionally use the other terms where appropriate.

2 The canon consisted of key Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist texts (Farrer 2007: 95).

3 Dong Qichang's art-theoretical intervention towards the end of the Ming period was a decisive moment in the development of the ideal of the scholar-painter. Dong grounded his theory in Chan Buddhism and associated literati painting with the so-called Southern school

---

(Clunas 2009: 161).

4 Like the Northern literati, where court art scholars were more concerned with changing the social order of the country during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) (Li 1999).

5 Southern school poetic literati exiled in order to indulge their poetic aesthetics in remote zones (Li 1999).

6 With the exception of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (1982–5), which brought restrictions to Westernized modernist and individualist values (Larson 1989).