

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Evolution and adaptation of cultural
architecture: Survival strategies of the oil
painting industry cluster in Songzhuang art
district, Beijing, China, under multiple pressuresZhao Chen^{*ID}, Noor Azizi Bin Mohd Ali^{ID}, and Mohd Fabian Bin Hasna^{ID}

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Abstract

Since the late 20th century, art districts have emerged as increasingly important cultural spaces within the social fabric. However, the growing influence of capital, urban development pressures, and constraints on artistic expression has transformed some art districts into commercialized zones with diminished industrial depth. This study focuses on the adaptive mechanisms employed by the oil painting industry cluster in Beijing's Songzhuang art district in response to a range of multidimensional challenges. A comprehensive methodology comprising semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and literature analysis was adopted to construct a systematic framework for survival strategies. The findings indicate that the cluster's sustainable development hinges on three key factors: artistic innovation capability, economic synergy, and social inclusivity. Based on this analysis, the study suggests enhancing cluster resilience while preserving its cultural characteristics through three aspects: optimizing spatial resources, supporting creative systems, and fostering community engagement.

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1. Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Singapore have pioneered the use of creativity as a catalyst for economic growth and urban revitalization. This shift has increasingly challenged the traditional primacy of labor- and resource-intensive industries. As Hall (2000, p.640) stated, "Culture is now seen as the magic substitute for all the lost factories and warehouses, and as a device that will create a new urban image, making the city more attractive to mobile capital and mobile professional workers." The instrumental value of creative and cultural industries has emerged as a pivotal element of urban revitalization strategies. Represented by prominent examples such as the SoHo art district in New York, the South Bank art district in London, the Left Bank art district in Paris, the Brewery

art colony in Los Angeles, the Mullae art village in Seoul, and the Zona Tortona art district in Milan, art-empowered agglomeration spaces have successively emerged across the globe. These areas have increasingly evolved into captivating landscapes and cultural landmarks within the post-industrial society (Rong, 2021).

In the 21st century, as mechanized industries gradually moved away from urban centers, leaving behind abandoned factories, the Chinese government initiated an industrial space transformation plan. This plan organically combined industrial heritage sites with art clusters, establishing a series of art districts focused on cultural and creative industry clusters (Zeng, 2015). Art districts have emerged as a cultural phenomenon marking the transition from industrial to post-industrial society and have been prioritized in development planning in recognition of their contribution to societal development (Keane, 2013). With the establishment of the art district concept in the late 1990s, the influx of avant-garde artists, along with the continuous growth of private capital, Songzhuang has witnessed the emergence of numerous creative industry clusters (G. Wang, 2009). These clusters encompass a wide range of artistic forms, including oil painting, traditional Chinese painting, calligraphy, watercolor, and installation art. Among these, oil painting, as an internationally recognized art form, has found an ideal haven in Songzhuang's unique cultural atmosphere and social environment.

However, the subsequent large-scale commercial development and land planning have disrupted the ecological balance of the art district, reducing living and creative spaces for artists. For middle- and lower-tier painters in the cluster, the transformed Songzhuang has not only failed to improve their living conditions but also intensified their pressures due to rising living costs. This phenomenon creates a paradox: while artists inject vitality into Songzhuang and create cultural opportunities, they have become "victims" in the wave of development (Yang, 2017). Furthermore, due to multiple influences including globalization, changing esthetic preferences, and market forces, many artists have compromised their artistic integrity in pursuit of commercial success. As Horkheimer and Adorno (2010) argued, modern mass culture's emphasis on commodification and consumption has forced art to yield to market demands. When cultural art becomes part of industrial production, it is reduced to a money-making commodity, subordinated to the logic of exchange value and market forces. This trend poses a significant concern for the future of the oil painting cluster.

This study aims to formulate a strategic framework that addresses the current survival challenges of the oil painting industry cluster in the Songzhuang art district. It seeks

to enhance the integration of the creative class into the district's interactive networks and cultural environment, thereby promoting the cluster's long-term sustainability. The study addresses the following research questions: (i) what is the present survival status of the oil painting industry cluster in the Songzhuang art district? (ii) what strategies can be developed to ensure the survival of the oil painting industry cluster at the Songzhuang art district? Accordingly, the goals of this research are (i) to examine the recent state and practical challenges facing the oil painting industry cluster in Songzhuang art district and (ii) to design a strategic framework for the cluster's survival, with the objective of coping with the existing problems and promoting future development.

The research is grounded in three key facets of survival for the oil painting industry cluster: space optimization, creative support, and community building. It aims to assess the current use of space and identify new creative grounds to resist this spatial shortage in urban settings, particularly through ecological design and the promotion of open studios. Even if it becomes impossible for the current form of Songzhuang art district to continue, the oil painting industry cluster may adapt and thrive by developing new creative locations. Oil painting practitioners must reconnect with the essence of art, uphold original artistic standards, and redefine their market positioning. Most importantly, the cluster needs to establish a painters' alliance, while art institutions should assume diversified roles with a strong emphasis on public benefit. Government policies should shift away from traditional support mechanisms toward more humanistic approaches that foster shared communities and cultivate a healthy, sustainable artistic ecosystem.

The significance of the present study lies in its recognition that the improvement and evolution of the oil painting industry cluster and the development of the art district are mutually reinforcing. Advancing both in tandem will enhance the comprehensive capabilities of painters within the cluster and improve the attractiveness and competitiveness of the entire art district. Furthermore, the research findings will provide valuable guidance for government bodies, artists, enterprises, and other stakeholders, enabling them to better understand the importance and development needs of art districts and implement effective measures to strengthen the role of the oil painting industry cluster within the art district.

2. Literature review

2.1. Formation and dilemmas of the Songzhuang art district

Between 1993 and 1995, a group of renowned artists and critics took the lead in purchasing properties in Songzhuang,

Beijing, China, triggering a large-scale migration of artists, including many from the Yuanmingyuan Artists' Village. This migration not only marked the initial formation of the Songzhuang art district but also defined its informal and spontaneous development (Ji, 2023; Yan, 2005; Yang, 2009; Zhao, 2020). Initially, the Songzhuang art district was primarily composed of painters, hence its nickname, "Painters' Village." Its artistic community included not only modern oil painters but also traditional Chinese painters and commercial artists (Yan, 2005). With the successive arrival of literary creators, sculptors, and musicians, as well as gallery owners, critics, and curators, Songzhuang gradually evolved from a painters' enclave into an interdisciplinary artistic ecological zone (Yu, 2008). This transformation allowed it to break free from the structural constraints and ideological limitations of the Yuanmingyuan era, giving rise to movements such as cynical realism, political pop art, and kitsch art (Chen, 2013; Zhou, 2017).

The formation of the Songzhuang art district was initially driven by artists' pursuit of idealism and a consciousness of social critique (Xia, 2010). Unlike mass-production-based hubs such as Dafen village in Shenzhen, Songzhuang focuses primarily on original art creation (Yang, 2009). From a spatial perspective, the Songzhuang art district integrates artists' studios, art trading institutions, and public service platforms (Kong, 2007; Wang, 2010; Yang, 2009; Zhang, 2022). Kong (2007) points out that Songzhuang has developed considerable industrial scale and independent research and development capabilities, supported by comprehensive infrastructure, public services, and a high-quality living and consumption environment. Li (2013) describes the Songzhuang art district as an experimental field full of freedom and creativity, serving both as a utopia for the artist community and a creative realm where art, architecture, and lifestyle converge.

In recent years, the government has established the local brand of "China Songzhuang," implemented legal management, and carried out a series of industrialization strategies to redesign and transform the space (Chen & Feng, 2024). This process has seen artists, architectural spaces, and regional cultural ecology mutually shape one another, fostering the organic integration of cultural communities, cultural industries, and cultural cities (Hu, 2012). As a result, Songzhuang has become not only an important carrier for cultural and creative industries but also a contributor to the diversification of modern urban economic development (Ji, 2023).

However, as the Songzhuang art district has evolved, its underlying problems have become increasingly evident, sparking scholarly debate about its future. Regarding

challenges facing the creative class, Huang (2012) argues that collaborations among media, art dealers, and curators have gradually eroded artists' independence and creativity, while commercialization has weakened their esthetic autonomy. These losses of core artistic qualities have hindered the district's long-term artistic development. Xia (2010) holds a similar view, arguing that under the influence of new ideologies, many artists now prioritize material pursuit over artistic creation, leading to a significant decline in originality and avant-garde nature of their works. Furthermore, the so-called "Songzhuang effect" has attracted numerous artists of varying professional levels, many of whom aspire to emulate the success of renowned artists such as Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun. However, due to a lack of systematic professional training and clear artistic positioning, coupled with their "overnight success" mentality, these artists face severe constraints in both career development and life adaptation (Huang, 2012).

Kong's (2007) survey of 64 artists in Songzhuang revealed stark income disparities within a resource-constrained environment. While a few painters earn substantial incomes, most artists face unstable earnings, with some struggling to meet basic living needs. Even those who have achieved modest recognition often remain in dire financial circumstances.

Similarly, a survey by the Research Group of Beijing Tongzhou District Socialist Institute & An (2018) found that professional artists in Songzhuang typically earn low- to medium-level incomes, with nearly 40% earning below Beijing's 2016 average wage. Rising costs associated with rent, children's education, healthcare, and retirement planning have added to their financial burden. As this community becomes increasingly marginalized, there is an urgent need for broader societal recognition and support (Li, 2013; Yang, 2017; Zhang, 2012).

In addition to economic hardship, the district faces numerous challenges in management and marketing. For example, while the local government's expansion strategy and villager resettlement plans serve administrative goals, they have disrupted the long-established symbiotic relationship between artists and local residents (Zhang, 2014). In addition, Li's (2016) survey highlights operational inefficiencies among Songzhuang's major art museums, such as unclear cultural positioning, overlapping functions, and ambiguous operational directions, which represent factors contributing to a steady decline in visitor engagement. Despite governmental support for open creation and commercial efforts to actively promote cultural consumption, the district's overall management and service standards have not kept pace with its industrial growth (Bao and Yan, 2021).

2.2. Evolutionary trajectories and adaptive responses of China's oil painting industry cluster

In the early 21st century, China's oil painting industry began to develop clustering characteristics. Although scholars have attempted to define the concept of oil painting industry clusters, a unified definition has yet to emerge. However, based on existing research concerning the "oil painting industry," such clusters can be viewed as models centered on oil painting production, forming efficient and complete industrial chains through the concentration of resources and collaboration within specific geographic areas. These clusters promote regional economic growth and the prosperity of cultural creative industries (Qiang, 2015; Sun, 2009; Yu *et al.*, 2016).

Further examination reveals that oil painting industry clusters, as a significant branch of art industry clusters, share key characteristics with the broader category. Grodach *et al.* (2014) suggest that arts clusters possess distinct industrial, spatial, and spatial-related attributes and demonstrate greater economic impact when concentrated in "innovation districts." From this perspective, oil painting industry clusters, as concentrated forms of a specific art industry, further enrich the conceptual and developmental models of clustering. The clustering of the oil painting industries has generated scale effects by reducing costs across the supply chain and establishing comprehensive art industry ecosystems. This agglomeration encourages a specialized division of labor and cooperation among enterprises, boosting production efficiency and the flow of information, thereby promoting innovation and knowledge sharing. In addition, these clusters have created favorable conditions for the emergence of new artistic businesses, contributing to the overall growth of the sector (Dong & Chen, 2016).

According to Li (2020), the traditional geographically localized networks in the oil painting industry have evolved into "energy circle" networks, characterized by multi-regional collisions and collaborative development that transcend spatial barriers. Hu (2004) suggests that competition within clusters facilitates cooperation, resulting in the formation of new ecosystems that reinforce cultural influence and brand identity. Lin and Shuai (2017) remark that infrastructure such as incubation centers, art museums, and marketplaces has been incorporated into oil painting industry clusters, accelerating both the industrial chain and the art marketization. In addition, the decentralization of creative control from institutions to individual artists has revitalized the industry, disrupting the monopolistic command chain of the traditional art world (Hu, 2004; Li, 2020).

As the oil painting industry clusters mature, they encounter increasing pressures that have prompted the

attention of scholars. According to Zhu (2010) and Wang (2019), talent is the foundation of competitive advantage. Current challenges in oil painting industry clusters include an absence of talented artists, low artistic standards, and a lack of professional art management personnel. These shortcomings not only hinder industry growth but also hamper the enhancement of artistic content. Scholars such as Dholakia *et al.* (2015) and Lin (2013) emphasize the tension between artistic principles and commercial interests and demands, observing that an influx of commercial painters has swarmed the market with low-quality artworks, thereby undermining the artistic value and quality of the clusters. In addition to the effect of commercialization on creative vitality, Huang (2020) unearths an increase in operational costs, stiff competition, and technological upheaval in the industry.

Scholars have advanced different strategies in response to these sufferings. A few studies have focused on the necessity that cluster development should be solidly based on local qualities and native culture. To further illustrate, the Lichuan Danxia landforms and the high cliffs in Jiangxi provide distinctive settings for artistic creation. Bao *et al.* (2020) advocate an integrated tourism model that combines oil painting, culture, and the development of new rural villages. According to Lu *et al.* (2011), the wealth of cultural resources in Hebei province contributes five unique components that facilitate the branding of oil painting industry clusters. These analyses aim to strengthen the development of such clusters by reinforcing local identity and cultural integration.

Other scholars have offered recommendations related to technology, management, market dynamics, and policy. Fan (2020), for instance, discusses how painters in Dafen village employ computer-aided technologies in their art creation processes. Li (2022) and Jin (2021) suggest recruiting more flexible and highly competent staff, and urge art institutions to incorporate both positive and physically present aspects of interaction to increase the level of engagement of audiences. Liu and Huang (2016) emphasize that oil painting should expand beyond local markets to reach global audiences with works that resonate with broader esthetic preferences. Regarding financial and policy considerations, Qian *et al.* (2006) propose the development of a collaborative model centered on the oil painting industry, including improvements in supply chain infrastructure and the securing of funding through government support and diverse financing channels. Chen and Qi (2021) introduce the concept of "urban symbiosis," suggesting that public participation in optimizing shared spaces and preserving cultural heritage can foster greater harmony between industrial clusters and urban development.

Based on the above academic research, three core questions merit deeper exploration: first, can the Songzhuang oil painting industry cluster develop into a professional artistic community capable of creating new painting forms influential enough to shape mainstream art and culture? Second, can government departments move beyond “heavy planning” and real estate-focused approaches to become genuine cultural facilitators, creating more inclusive and unrestricted spaces for artistic expression? Finally, can oil painters achieve sustainable livelihoods and growth through their art? Answering these questions requires not only a thorough review of the literature but also extensive field research and in-depth analysis.

2.3. Systematic theoretical framework

The establishment and evolution of art districts such as Songzhuang can be understood as outcomes of both spatial and cultural dynamics. Existing literature explores the economic role of creative industries in the context of urban regeneration (Florida, 2002), while other studies highlight the influence of government policies on cultural spaces (Harvey, 2005). Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of spatial political economy and creative city theory, this study analyzes the unique characteristics and survival strategies of the oil painting industry cluster in Songzhuang.

This approach is enshrined in the theoretical concepts of spatial political economy and creative city theory, offering an extensive view through which the dynamic relationships among urban development, cultural creativity, and economic dynamics of Songzhuang can be explored.

2.3.1. Political economy of space

Spatial political economy is a theoretical model that analyses the role of the political, economic, and social forces in shaping the geographical space. It dwells on how urban development is influenced by the distribution of power and how economic incentives are embedded in spatial configurations. In the case of Songzhuang, this framework enables a deeper understanding of the effects of government policies (e.g., zoning laws, land use regulations) and economic forces (e.g., land value) on the district's physical and cultural landscape. As Harvey (2005) argues, urban space is never neutral; it is defined by underlying social relations and power structures, which are fundamental for studying the evolution of the district.

2.3.2. Theory of creative cities

According to creative city theory, the culture and arts industries can drive urban regeneration and economic prosperity. Developed by Richard Florida in 2002,

the theory highlights the role of the creative class in shaping the economic and cultural landscapes of cities. In the case of Songzhuang, this theory aligns with the district's development trajectory and its emerging artistic character. It posits that creativity can serve as a major engine of cultural and economic development, provided it is supported by enabling policies and a conducive environment. Supporting this argument, Florida (2002) asserts that cities that nurture creativity are more likely to succeed in the global economy, making the cultural sector a major strength of urban renewal.

By employing these two theoretical frameworks, this article seeks to explain the spatial dynamics and cultural policy interactions in the Songzhuang art district. It aims to shed light on the interaction between urbanization processes and artistic activities, as well as their economic implications and governance structures, in the context of sustaining the oil painting industry cluster.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Case study

Yin (2003) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. It typically involves the use of multiple sources of evidence. The case study method is particularly suitable for answering “why” and “how” questions, rather than the normative “what should be” questions. Depending on research objectives, case studies can be categorized as descriptive, explanatory, evaluative, or exploratory. Exploratory case studies aim to uncover new insights into phenomena or to evaluate them from fresh perspectives (Eisenhardt, 1989). Given that the research questions in the present study were designed to explore and address “what” questions in an investigative manner, the exploratory case study approach is deemed the most appropriate.

Case studies can also be classified as either single-case or multiple-case studies, depending on the number of cases examined. Yin (2003) posits that a single-case study is useful for confirming or challenging existing theories, or for analyzing unique or extreme cases. In contrast, multiple-case studies involve two distinct analytical phases: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. The former entails a thorough examination of each case as a standalone entity, while the latter synthesizes findings across cases to yield more concise descriptions and robust explanations. The present study adopted a single-case exploratory approach, concentrating on the essential characteristics of the oil painting industry cluster within the Songzhuang art district.

In addition, case studies can be distinguished by their level of analysis, namely, holistic (single-level analysis) and embedded (multi-level analysis) approaches. The present study employed both perspectives. The holistic component analyzed the broader context of the Songzhuang art district, while the embedded component investigated various aspects of painters' current living conditions in order to reveal their survival strategies.

3.2. Research design

The present research began with an analysis of government reports, art market data, and relevant literature, followed by semi-structured interviews with artists, gallery operators, and district managers. These interviews focused on collecting information related to the oil painting cluster's creative work, living conditions, operations, and artistic activities. In addition, one of the researchers, Zhao Chen, entered Songzhuang as an oil painter and conducted participatory observation. Her works, such as *Fishing Melody* and *Breath of the Sea*, were exhibited at the Songzhuang Art Fair, and long-term personal and professional relationships were established with several local painters. Zhao Chen frequently visited artists' studios, engaging in both professional discussions and informal social interactions, including shared meals, tea, and casual conversations. Although her subjectivity could not be entirely excluded, direct observation of the artists' creative processes, daily struggles, and coping strategies enabled a deeper "understanding" of their language, including metaphors and non-verbal expressions. As a result, the data presented in the present study go beyond surface-level description, instead grounded in long-term trust and shared experience—insights that would be difficult for an outsider to gain. Therefore, this research does not rely on a de-subjectivized notion of objectivity; rather, it acknowledges and leverages the methodological advantages afforded by the researcher's dual identity—as both an artist and a researcher—to generate knowledge that is interpretively rich and grounded in lived experience.

The Songzhuang art district was chosen as the research case for several reasons. First, as a point of intersection between Eastern and Western art systems, as well as elite and popular culture, Songzhuang provides a unique context for examining the survival of creative industry clusters. Second, the primary artists in Songzhuang served as initiators and founders of the district, working in collaboration with critics, villagers, and local authorities. This bottom-up model of development reflects the spontaneity and autonomy of the oil painting industry cluster. Third, the Songzhuang art district fulfills multiple roles: it cultivates talent, promotes art education, facilitates cultural exchange, and contributes to local economic

growth, demonstrating the complex interplay between art, business, innovation, and society. Fourth, Songzhuang reflects current tensions amid local and global forces, state regulation, artistic freedom, market demands, and esthetic standards. These internal contradictions have transformed Songzhuang into a prototype of "openness," where artistic spaces and original residents coexist, offering a foundation for the development of adaptive strategies. Fifth, government cultural policies have had a significant impact on the Songzhuang art district. Through infrastructure development, marketization, and urbanization, Songzhuang has been transformed into a new style of art center built upon a traditional village. While these changes have spurred economic development, they have also increased rents and the cost of living, restricting both the physical and creative space of artists, and in some cases, forcing them to relocate. These transformations hold important lessons on how survival strategies can be enhanced and how the ecosystem of an art district can be sustained. Therefore, Songzhuang serves as a valuable case study for understanding how such tactics can function in practice.

3.3. Data collection procedures and sampling

After selecting the research site, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Open-ended questions were designed to allow interviewees to fully express their thoughts and experiences. Different sampling methods were employed for three distinct participant groups. These methods were chosen to enable purposeful engagement with individuals possessing specific characteristics and to expand the sample size through referrals from existing interviewees, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of their perspectives and lived experiences. For the painter group (including emerging, experimental, avant-garde, and traditional painters), the research employed a combination of simple random sampling, convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling.

For art intermediary roles (including art institution operators, art market professionals, art critics, and curators) and institutional-level actors (including policymakers and cultural administrators, who, in Bourdieu's "field of art" theory or new institutionalism, are viewed as rule-setters and "framework builders" of the art field), snowball and purposive sampling were employed. Details of the classification and sampling methods are presented in Table 1.

The researchers initially contacted 28 potential interviewees, conducted pilot interviews with eight of them, and then, selected 20 for formal interviews. Of the 20 interviewees:

- 14 were painters aged between 30 and 70, most of whom maintained stable studios in Songzhuang; several had received formal training at art academies
- 4 were from art intermediary roles, including gallery owners, art dealers, independent curators, and senior art critics, each active in the Beijing art scene for over 5 years
- 2 were institutional-level actors involved in cultural policymaking and local arts administration.

The interviewees came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including oil painting, journalism, art theory, and public administration, and all demonstrated a certain level of esthetic literacy. Collectively, they provided

a multidimensional perspective on the Songzhuang art ecosystem. To ensure both geographical coverage and interviewee convenience, the research employed a combination of face-to-face and online interviews. Interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the interviewees (e.g., their homes or local coffee shops), lasting between 40 to 90 minutes, depending on the depth of responses. Table 2 presents the basic demographic and professional information of the participants.

Before each formal interview, the researchers explained the interview content to participants, ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' personal information, and obtained informed consent. All

Table 1: Interviewee groups and corresponding sampling methods

Interviewee category	Included group	Sampling method
Painter group	Emerging painters, experimental painters, avant-garde painters, traditional painters	Simple random sampling, convenience sampling, snowball sampling, purposive sampling
Art intermediary roles	Art institution operators, art market professionals, art critics, curators	Snowball sampling, purposive sampling
Institutional-level actors	Policymakers, cultural administrators	Snowball sampling, purposive sampling

Table 2. Basic information of research participants

Serial no.	Name	Nationality	Region	Age	Gender	Career	Education background	Major
1.	WX	China	Beijing	67	M	University professor	Bachelor	Oil painting
2.	Xiaoman	China	Beijing	43	F	Professional painter	Bachelor	Oil painting
3.	ZJJ	China	Beijing	50	M	University professor, part-time artist	Bachelor	Oil painting
4.	Plums	China	Jinan	50	F	Professional painter	Bachelor	Oil painting
5.	ZL	China	Jinan	60	M	Professional painter	Bachelor	Oil painting
6.	Qi	China	Beijing	40	F	Art museum director, curator	Bachelor	Journalism
7.	Niu	China	Beijing	39	F	Cultural union official	Master	Art theory
8.	ZB	China	Beijing	55	M	Professional painter	Bachelor	Oil painting
9.	Xiao Liu	China	Beijing	46	M	Professional painter	Bachelor	Oil painting
10.	Lily	China	Beijing	57	F	University professor, part-time artist	Bachelor	Oil painting
11.	HB	China	Shanghai	70	M	Professional painter, chairman of the artists' association	Bachelor	Oil painting
12.	Wws	China	Beijing	60	M	Professional painter	Bachelor	Oil painting
13.	Cyc	China	Jinan	76	M	Art critic, curator	Ph.D	Art theory
14.	Li Yu	China	Beijing	49	M	University professor, part-time artist	Ph.D	Oil painting
15.	XB	China	Beijing	60	F	Director of the local artists' association	Bachelor	Oil painting and art theory
16.	Tang	China	Beijing	30	F	Professional painter	Bachelor	Oil Painting
17.	Zhan Yu	China	Beijing	50	M	Manager of public art organization, curator	Master	Arts management
18.	Jun Xiang	China	Beijing	47	F	Private gallery operator, curator	Bachelor	Oil painting
19.	Gao	China	Beijing	45	F	University professor, part-time artist	Ph.D	Oil painting
20.	Old Li	China	Beijing	55	M	Professional painter	Bachelor	Oil painting

Abbreviations: F: Female; M: Male.

interviews were conducted in Chinese and audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Verbatim transcriptions were produced using the iFlytek Hearing software (Version 7.0), and then, the content was subsequently translated into English with careful attention to preserving the original meanings.

3.4. Data analysis

The present study employed the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA (Version 2020), combining thematic analysis and grounded theory methods to analyze the interview data. Initially, based on the logical design of the research questions and interview guide, the researchers conducted a preliminary thematic analysis to organize the material (the interview data) into three core themes: optimization of spatial resources, support for the creative system, and community building. This phase, guided by the research objectives, provided a thematic framework for subsequent grounded theory coding, enhancing analytical focus and comparability.

Building on this foundation, the researchers adopted the three-stage coding method of grounded theory, applying a bottom-up approach. During the open coding stage, the data were broken down into minimal units of meaning. For example, one interviewee described:

Any artistic expression identical to others is merely repetition and copying, which naturally holds no value. The most important value lies not only in being different from others but also in demonstrating excellence through uniqueness. This excellence is not just about techniques and methods in the artwork, but more importantly, about the deeper message the artwork conveys. When creating art, we should consider how the presented content relates to society and the world, as well as the novel experience it brings to viewers.

From this excerpt, the researchers identified initial concepts such as “uniqueness in artistic creation,” “excellence in artistic expression,” “social relevance,” and “innovation in viewer experience.”

Subsequently, in the axial coding stage, the researchers constructed mid-level categories by identifying internal connections between concepts. The concepts above were grouped under the category “continuous innovation and breaking with tradition.” Such intermediate themes appeared repeatedly across the entire dataset, forming multiple key thematic sets.

In the final stage, selective coding, the researchers systematically integrated the axial categories to form core categories and constructed a survival strategy model

for the Songzhuang oil painting industry cluster. The resulting theoretical model conceptualizes the cluster's survival strategy as a multi-driven ecosystem: with artistic creation at its core, supported by economic incentives (e.g., public funding and private investment), socially inclusive communities providing emotional and institutional support, and market institutions (e.g., galleries, museums, art brokers) maintaining the feedback loop between the art world and the market. The stability of this ecosystem depends on the coordinated functioning of these elements; an imbalance in any link could weaken the overall vitality of the cluster and jeopardize its sustainable development.

The model's key dimensions—innovation capability, economic coordination, and social inclusion—were assessed using qualitative criteria. Innovation capability was evaluated by examining the diversity of artistic styles and the emergence of new techniques within the district. Economic coordination was assessed based on collaboration between artists and local businesses. Social inclusion was measured through indicators of community engagement, such as collaborative art projects involving both artists and local residents.

3.5. Theoretical saturation test

An important criterion for assessing the quality of qualitative research is whether the final theoretical model achieves theoretical saturation—that is, whether additional data fails to derive new categories or insights. To test this, after the initial phase of the present study concluded, the researchers conducted a second round of interviews following the same procedures. Five additional interviewees were selected, and their data were subjected to open, axial, and selective coding. The results indicated that no new categories or themes emerged in this additional round of coding, and the logical relationships among the existing categories remained unchanged. Therefore, the theoretical model developed in this study can be considered saturated.

4. Research findings and discussions

The Songzhuang art district has undergone impressive development over the past few decades, marked by several fundamental changes that have shaped its contemporary identity. Originally a small, informal art community, the district experienced successful stages of commercialization, urbanization, and the pluralization of artistic practices. These spatial and structural transformations have directly influenced the survival strategies adopted by artists operating in the district. The major milestones of this evolution are summarized in [Figure 1](#).

This research employed one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, allowing interviewees to express their views

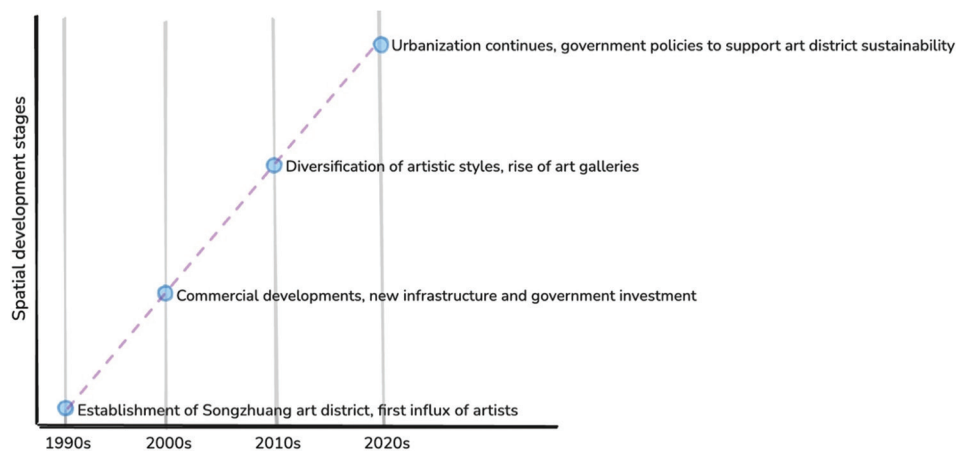


Figure 1. Spatial evolution of the Songzhuang art district
Source: Graph by the authors

on survival-related issues in depth. After organizing and coding the interview content, three core survival strategies were identified: (i) transformation and expansion of creative spaces, (ii) personalized exploration of creative practices, and (iii) construction of a healthy artistic ecosystem.

4.1. Transformation and expansion of creative spaces

In response to the spatial constraints of Songzhuang and mounting pressures from urbanization, interviewees suggested that development should proceed along two main dimensions:

- (i) Optimizing and renovating existing spaces, including incorporating natural landscape elements and promoting open studios to enhance both the creative atmosphere and interactive functionality of spaces
- (ii) Migrating to establish new creative bases in places such as Yanjiao and Fang counties. For example, some interviewees stated:

If Songzhuang had beautiful natural scenery, it would inspire more creativity in painters. For example, we could plant dynamic vegetation like willows and reeds along Art Avenue, Life Square, and open parks, complemented by seasonal flowers. In the center of the green belt, we could plan artificial lakes or water features (such as fountains or reflecting pools), with oil paintings displayed along both banks, creating a multi-layered “landscape painting corridor.” Through water reflections, we could create a visual effect where “scenery exists within paintings, and paintings within scenery,” cultivating an artistic atmosphere where reality and illusion interweave (Gao, face-to-face interview, September 7, 2024).

Following this vision, some painters regularly create a “Dialogue with Nature” series of oil paintings, deeply exploring the interactive relationship between nature and artistic expression, while crafting a unique cultural identity. Moreover, interviewees noted that closed-off studios limit both economic opportunities and public engagement. Opening studios and expanding physical spaces were seen as essential improvements. As one participant stated:

Some painters face survival challenges because they have not properly connected with the market. By opening their studios, painters can understand society’s demands and adjust their painting direction and style accordingly. It is very difficult to create a world-shocking painting while working in an isolated studio (Cyc, face-to-face interview, July 10, 2024).

Due to low rent, convenient transportation, and relatively modest development, the peripheral areas around Songzhuang have become a refuge for many painters seeking temporary relief from urban pressure. Painter Tang rented a studio by the Chaobai river in Yanjiao, and she candidly stated:

The rent here is so cheap, only a bit over RMB 1,000/month—it is dirt cheap compared to Songzhuang! What’s there to hesitate about? The best part is I no longer have to live in constant fear of my studio being demolished (Tang, second face-to-face interview, December 29, 2024).

Beyond nearby Yanjiao and Dachang, some painters have joined artist residency programs across China. For example, the Fang County Art District in Hubei has attracted artists from across the country with its beautiful environment and policy support. As Zeng Ming, chief planner of the district, explained:

The Fang county government has designed a series of policies based on artists' needs, enabling them to acquire real estate at lower costs and develop their work here with peace of mind. For artists who are less financially established or younger, they can rent and develop here, with rental prices much lower than in Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou (Sohu, 2022).

In response, painter Wws commented:

Although this place does not have the bustling art market like Songzhuang, the living environment is more comfortable, and the policies are very supportive of painters, allowing us to create more freely. With its beautiful mountains and clear waters, is not this the "poetry and distant lands" that artists have always dreamed of? (Wws, second online interview, October 29, 2024).

This study proposes the optimization of spatial resources. Here, the term "optimization" refers not merely to the redistribution of spatial resources, but to the institutional restructuring of existing spatial frameworks. This process enables artists to maintain the basic conditions for living and creating amid ongoing urban renewal processes. Specifically, governments can support the sustainability of artistic spaces by designating low-rent cultural zones, adjusting zoning policies, and offering tax incentives. At the level of land policy, this includes flexible responses to issues related to usage rights, temporary occupancy, and informal space utilization. In addition, effective spatial optimization requires co-construction mechanisms that involve multiple stakeholders—artists, developers, and local governments—in collaborative spatial planning. Such mechanisms may include participatory planning, co-managed spaces, and coordinated short- and long-term usage rights. In this way, cultural production becomes more securely embedded within urban transformation processes, rather than serving merely as a decorative or symbolic element.

Within this framework, the study finds that artists are actively adjusting their relationship with the environment. Interviewees generally recognized the value of integrating artistic creation with the surrounding context. This synthesis enhances the quality of their work while elevating Songzhuang's cultural landscape, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship between the oil painting industry and its geographical setting. These findings align with the view of Y. Bao *et al.* (2020), who believe that natural landscapes and profound cultural heritage provide unique conditions for oil painting creation, and who advocate a development model that integrates "oil painting, culture, and new rural scenery" to optimize creative spaces. Lu *et al.*

(2011) argue that rich landscape and cultural elements can strengthen local identity and enhance the branding appeal of oil painting industry clusters.

However, this development process is not a linear progression but unfolds through dynamic negotiations among multiple stakeholders. The government typically prioritizes urban renewal and regional economic benefits, while real estate developers focus on maximizing profits through spatial capital. Art institutions and individual artists, by contrast, strive to preserve autonomy and ensure the economic sustainability of their creative spaces. The distribution of resources and interests among these parties is not always in harmony. Developers' investments may raise rental costs, squeezing out artists, while government policy can fluctuate between supporting "cultural image projects" and "practical industrial support." To reconcile these tensions, institutionalized negotiation and targeted policy interventions are necessary to establish a win-win spatial governance structure.

Against this backdrop, the 2024 "Three-Year Action Plan for the High-Quality Development of the Songzhuang Art and Creative Town" proposes the creation of an original art exhibition cluster in the northern district. This plan includes infrastructure upgrades and landscape improvements and encourages artists to transform their studios from isolated creative spaces into gallery-style composite studios that combine exhibition and sales functions. The open studio strategy allows artists to step out of their "ivory towers" at appropriate times, engage with society, and respond to market demands, thus producing artworks more grounded in lived experience and more adaptable to the market. As Wang (2018) states, paintings cannot be separated from the spirit of their producers (artists), and that spirit, in turn, is shaped by the objective world and social life that serve as its "raw materials." Upgrading studios into gallery-style spaces where art can be "viewed and purchased" enables art to both enter and be inspired by everyday life.

In terms of housing, many artists rent informal or self-built structures within urban villages. Although the rent is relatively low (typically RMB 800 to 1,500/month), the lack of legal property rights exposes them to eviction risks. With ongoing land development projects in parts of Songzhuang, these artists face increasing pressure from studio displacement and the replacement of creative spaces with commercial projects.

In recent years, areas such as Yanjiao and Fang counties have emerged as alternative "emerging art cities" for displaced artists. Several new art districts have been established in these areas, including the Zuodi road art district and Hongxiang tech-art zone (Tencent News, 2024). Unlike the tense rhythm and utilitarian drive of

urbanization, these art districts showcase an inclusive ecosystem where artists are no longer seen as temporary visitors or passive tenants, but as integral members of local cultural life. This atmosphere provides artists with stable creative conditions and a sense of dignity, setting new standards for art district development and reshaping the relationship between artists and localities. Curator Deng Ting believes that these emerging art districts have inspired artists to explore new creative spaces. This art form, which integrates residential, creative, and communicative functions, demonstrates both the compromises artists make in response to real-world pressures and their creative thinking in difficult circumstances (Chen, 2021). Findings indicate that these spatial strategies not only respond to the oil painting industry cluster's demand for creative environments but also represent a key step in reshaping the carriers of artistic creative spaces. The transformation and expansion of creative spaces are both a response to current challenges and an exploration of future possibilities. Whether artists will ultimately rediscover their creative rhythm and revitalize their practices within these new creative bases remains to be seen.

4.2. Personalized exploration of creative practice

Interviewees generally believe that within the oil painting industry cluster, the spread of a “nomadic mindset” and intensifying commercialization trends have caused some painters to redirect their energy toward socializing, self-promotion, and leisure activities, rather than focusing on their artistic practice. However, most respondents emphasize that, regardless of how sophisticated an artist's business operations or how extensive their social networks may be, an artist's core competitiveness still lies in the artistic value and creative quality of their work. Curator Cyc was frank about this:

As a critic and curator, I have indeed helped some artists with commercial packaging, which has brought them more opportunities. However, the issue arises when income becomes easily attainable—artists face a choice: should they lower quality and increase production to maximize profits, or continue to create truly groundbreaking works that could earn further recognition? In fact, there exists a turning point between profit and reputation. When profits peak, artists can choose to either pursue greater financial gains or leverage their existing success to build artistic prestige (Cyc, face-to-face interview, July 10, 2024).

Although commercial success can bring short-term economic benefits, interviewees consistently noted that

only high-quality, meaningful work can sustain long-term recognition and attract a broader audience. As Zhan Yu pointed out:

Artists should return to their essence and focus on creation rather than blindly catering to the market. They need to find their own voice and stick to their creative principles to stand out in a volatile market. While the internet and self-media can serve as platforms for artists to promote themselves, ultimately, it is the quality of their work that determines their success (Zhan Yu, online interview, July 27, 2024).

HB echoed a similar sentiment:

To survive in Songzhuang, my biggest realization is that you have to perfect your paintings to the utmost, letting the work itself earn recognition. This is fundamental to an artist's survival (HB, online interview, July 21, 2024).

Interviewees emphasized that a return to dedicated creation is a fundamental requirement for preserving the artistic integrity of the oil painting industry cluster, especially under resource constraints and commercial pressure. Furthermore, they noted a recent rise in plagiarism incidents within the art world. For instance, in 2019, Belgian artist Christian Silvain accused Chinese painter Ye Yongqing of plagiarism (Xu, 2019). In response, Wws pointed out:

The essence of art lies in innovation—it should always be unique. Any artistic expression identical to another's is merely a copy, and naturally holds no value. Innovation is not only about technique and style but also about the deeper aspirations that artists convey. Creation should form genuine connections with the world while respecting the audience's experience (Wws, online interview, July 21, 2024).

He further elaborates on his understanding of innovation:

My work has always emphasized differentiation from others. From the very beginning of the creative process, I deliberately avoid conventional perspectives. I also constantly change my style, palette, techniques, and themes. While some artists are content to repeat themselves, I find it unacceptable for my practice to become stagnant (Wws, online interview, July 21, 2024).

Interviewees emphasized that exceptional painters must combine technical excellence with innovative thinking. The foundation of innovation lies in freedom

of thought, not in the limitations of media, habits, or market trends. Painters must resist homogenization and avoid blindly following trends. Instead, they should establish competitive advantages through individualized expression. Some interviewees observed that a number of painters lack a clear understanding of their own abilities, style, and market position, often imitating superficial trends without internalizing them. When they see others selling contemporary art pieces for millions using only a few brushstrokes, they attempt to imitate the formula, producing works that neither sell nor retain artistic individuality. Regarding this, Cyc commented:

Some painters in Songzhuang struggle because they have not clearly understood their roles and positions. It is as futile as trying to catch tigers in water or fish on a mountain. They need to carefully reflect on why they originally came to Songzhuang (Cyc, face-to-face interview, July 10, 2024).

Painter Xiaoman shared her own approach:

I am a realist-style painter, but I've noticed that decorative art is particularly popular in the market. Many consumers especially like modern minimalist style works because they can blend into daily life while enhancing the esthetics of home decor. For example, paintings like Yan Ping's that feature vibrant colors and female subjects are very popular because they're both modern and highly decorative. While works that are too complex or have deep themes may have higher artistic value, they can feel heavy or even create psychological pressure for ordinary households. Therefore, I try to adjust elements in my works to better align with market esthetic trends and consumer expectations. Of course, this does not mean I'm sacrificing artistic value—rather, I'm creating better emotional connections between my work and the audience (Xiaoman, online interview, July 4, 2024).

She added:

Commercialization is not a bad thing. When works sell, it is positive feedback for artists, indicating there's market demand for their creations. However, creating solely for the market can limit creativity. True artistic creation should stem from inner drive and insight into the world, rather than simple pandering (Xiaoman, online interview, July 4, 2024).

As mentioned above, these views collectively indicate that painters who focus on improving their artistic standards, rather than compromising with the market or excessively pursuing commercial interests, are the ones most likely to gain genuine recognition and respect from audiences. "Dedicated creation" is not only a core survival

strategy for individual painters but also an essential requirement for driving the positive cycle of the entire oil painting industry cluster. Furthermore, the research findings underscore the importance of continuous innovation, emphasizing the central role of originality in enhancing artistic quality and personal branding. As critic Yang Xiaoyan stated: "while originality may be difficult to define precisely, the value of art must contain some 'unprecedented' uniqueness, otherwise it loses its meaning" (Wan, 2019). Ultimately, the value of an artwork lies in its originality and intellectual depth, rather than in conformity or replication under market logic.

Furthermore, the results indicate that artists can effectively combine self-positioning with market demands, maintaining artistic independence while strategically responding to consumer demands. As Xu (2016) suggests, most people weave dazzling dreams for themselves, but if these dreams are incorrectly positioned, they naturally become mere fantasies. True self-positioning means recognizing one's actual level and market influence, accepting one's status as a third-tier or fifth-tier artist rather than blindly fantasizing about being or copying the successful paths of famous artists. Once self-positioning is established, market positioning becomes key to ensuring stable development. Changes in market tastes and demands have a particularly significant impact on lower- and mid-tier artists and can even shape the "destiny" of art districts (Molotch & Treskon, 2009; Zhang, 2019). Although these artists often lack institutional and financial backing, diversity in market demand also provides them with certain opportunities. The challenge lies in identifying viable niches within limited resources.

In practice, many artists rarely consider the "practicality" of their works during the creative process. However, this is precisely an important direction of market demand. Generally, ordinary art consumers value not only artistic merit but also the ability of artworks to beautify spaces such as homes, public areas, or office buildings (Tao & Wang, 2023). To appeal to a broader audience, artists can experiment with creating works that are both artistic and decorative. In contrast, high-level art consumers purchase artworks not merely for basic value appreciation but also for a range of social reasons, such as enhancing personal artistic cultivation, symbolizing social status, and establishing cultural discourse power within elite circles. These consumers typically seek exemplary works with spiritual connotations and high esthetic value. Such distinctions reflect how consumer groups shape artistic form (Arnold, 1951). Artists must engage in refined market positioning to identify audiences who genuinely appreciate their style and gradually cultivate a stable buyer base. With

consistent audience support, they can reduce reliance on side jobs or on producing formulaic commercial paintings and instead devote more energy to their areas of expertise. This shows that the relationship between artists and the market is not inherently antagonistic; it should be an organic interaction. Market demand can serve as a useful reference point, but the core of artistic creation lies in the artist's unique thinking, emotional expression, and perception of the world.

4.3. Building a healthy art ecosystem

As the Songzhuang art district has dispersed and its ecosystem evolved, painters within the oil painting industry cluster have gradually recognized the limitations of individual efforts. Interviewees believe that forming artistic groups with shared ideologies has become an effective strategy for maintaining discourse power and expanding influence. As the painter Xiaoman shared:

The establishment of cross-regional groups has created a new way for painters to connect. For instance, there's a small group called "New Figurative," initiated by Tan Jianwu and others. The group's members are spread across different locations—some in Beijing's Songzhuang, others in different cities. Most members are from the 1970s and 1980s generations, with academic backgrounds... We maintain a spiritual community through our works, discussions, and mutual support (Xiaoman, online interview, July 4, 2024).

Another interviewee recounted:

My old friends and I organized the "Realist Oil Painting Garden." Everyone contributes their own resources, and we hold small-scale exhibitions and discussions together. Anyone with similar ideologies can join in, and we've gradually built a shared community where everyone helps each other. Here, painters have found a spiritual belonging, and we can collectively voice our concerns when facing policy changes and market pressures, fighting for our own space and dignity (ZL, face-to-face interview, July 12, 2024).

Interviewees emphasized that by forming artist alliances and shared communities, artists not only establish spiritual homes and safe havens but also the industry cluster can also unify scattered individual voices to articulate artistic ideas, express survival needs, and advocate for industry rights more effectively, ultimately fostering a nurturing environment for the oil painting industry cluster.

Field visits revealed that the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 had a significant impact on Songzhuang's art scene. Public

events declined sharply, and the overall artistic atmosphere became subdued. The rise of online art sales further challenged traditional exhibition models, pushing many art institutions into hardship. On top of this, Songzhuang is undergoing demolition and reconstruction, with galleries and museums often closing down or being repurposed. In these difficult times, how can Songzhuang's art institutions revitalize the oil painting industry cluster? On this topic, the director of a private art museum, Qi, shared his thoughts:

Even with rich collections, museums and galleries in Songzhuang struggle to stay open and find it hard to turn art into assets. The Songzhuang art district has its own history and stories. I believe we should explore Songzhuang's artistic character. For example, we could plan exhibitions themed around "The History of Songzhuang Oil Painting" or "Songzhuang Painting Groups" to highlight our local culture and attract visitors and collectors (Qi, online interview, February 08, 2024).

Another interviewee, Jun Xiang, added:

The Songzhuang Art Museum, Shangshang Art Museum, Tree Art Museum, and Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive are all hidden treasures. I think we need to add more fun art activities, linking these art institutions together to create an art tour route that gives people a strong sense of involvement (Jun Xiang, face-to-face Interview, August 7, 2024).

Furthermore, interviewees emphasized that art institutions should transform their positioning from unidirectional artistic output providers to multi-directional dialog platforms, establishing credibility and fostering communication between markets, audiences, and artists. As Cyc emphasized:

While art institutions shape artistic narratives through exhibitions, one-way communication can no longer meet the increasingly diverse needs of audiences. In this age of art democratization, audiences are no longer passive recipients but individuals with unique understandings. Art institutions should not attempt to dictate how audiences think. A high-quality exhibition requires not only professional curation, rich collections, and superb painting techniques but also more importantly, it needs to touch the audience's hearts, inspire them to think, and convey cultural and esthetic values (Cyc, face-to-face interview, July 10, 2024).

Building on this perspective, Qi highlighted the evolving role of local art spaces in Songzhuang:

Museums and galleries in Songzhuang actually play multiple roles. Beyond serving collectors, they act more like bridges, connecting artists with viewers while taking on responsibilities in education, academic research, and information exchange. Each exhibition lets artists take a fresh look at their creative journey. Chatting with viewers and experts can spark many new ideas. This two-way exchange gives artists a way to grow beyond their comfort zone (Qi, online interview, August 2, 2024).

Interviewees also indicated that while discourse power was once controlled by the government, art institutions, and mainstream media, this rigid power structure has been disrupted by the rise of social media and short video platforms.

In November 2023, Songzhuang-based painter Men Xinxi was hospitalized due to illness. The local art community responded with both online fundraising and offline support. As Wu Youming noted:

He suffers from severe gout, with visible joint deformities, yet he still maintains a habit of heavy drinking. He has launched two online crowdfunding campaigns to cover his medical expenses. After his first hospitalization, his lifestyle did not change, which led to a relapse. He told me the hospital is pressing him for payment. I think the most important thing now is simply to help him get through this (Wu Youming, personal communication, November 30, 2023).

Through the public crowdfunding efforts initiated by the artistic community, broader awareness was raised about the precarious conditions faced by cultural laborers in the “gray zone” of Songzhuang. One particular symbolic case was the death of abstract painter Lu Lin. Although he had gained some recognition for his artistic achievements, he ultimately gave up treatment due to a lack of access to medical resources. Instead, he spent his final days painting, hoping to leave behind a body of work as a legacy for his children. His story triggered widespread sympathy on social media. Prominent figures such as Li Xianting, Fang Lijun, and Yue Minjun launched a support initiative, which led to the exhibition and acquisition of Lu Lin’s works under the title *The Legend of Lu Lin*. The viral dissemination of such cases transformed the artist’s identity from that of an isolated creative subject to a socially visible and empathetic figure.

However, these individual hardships reflect broader structural issues within the socioeconomic landscape. Lower-middle-class artists constitute a large yet marginalized group

in Songzhuang. Their income primarily depends on the sale of artworks, often lacking stable gallery representation or consistent market access. Some supplement their income through wall painting, commissioned portraits, or running small-scale art tutoring classes. Their income is highly unstable, and during the off-seasons, it often falls below Beijing’s minimum living standard.

In terms of education, most of these artists graduated from regional art colleges or teachers’ colleges, or entered the art field through self-training. A general lack of elite institutional backgrounds and professional networks places them at a disadvantage in the competitive art market.

“I’ve been painting well for six years, but no one’s buying,” painter Yu Shitao openly shared on Douyin. Through his video series *Artist’s Self-Rescue Records*, he tells his story of struggle and personal growth. Using social media, he transformed from a painter shy about self-promotion into someone who confidently faces the market. His honesty caught the attention of online followers and attracted support from prominent media figures such as Jia Heyi. Social media has thus transformed painters into active disseminators and marketers, reconstructing the relationship between artists and the market. The following excerpts highlight how individual artists have adapted to these changes through personal engagement with social media:

In the past, artists were accustomed to communicating with the outside world through intermediaries like galleries and agents, lacking opportunities for direct expression. Now, social media provides many artists with a communication channel free from intermediary interference (Cyc, face-to-face interview, July 10, 2024).

During the pandemic, I started selling my works through online auctions, and the results were surprisingly good. After packaging the artworks, I sent them to buyers via courier, which was quite efficient... I frequently upload my painting process, which has attracted quite a few followers. My Douyin account has gained 20,000 followers, and many people contact me through private messages to purchase my works directly (ZL, face-to-face interview, July 10, 2024).

A physical exhibition might only attract a few visitors, but when I post my paintings online, thousands of people can see them. Online exhibitions not only expand influence but also save on expensive venue costs (Xiaoman, online interview, July 4, 2024).

Moreover, self-media platforms have redefined the image of Songzhuang’s oil painting industry cluster

through personal narratives. Artist-run media platforms such as *Good Morning Songzhuang*, *Art Stories*, and *Big Song Big Song* capture the daily lives of painters, including their focus during creation, moments of inner anxiety and confusion, joy shared with friends over drinks, and quiet reflections on solitary nights, revealing a place where ordinary people struggle to make a living through art.

As discussed above, this research explores possible pathways for building a healthy art ecosystem at multiple levels. First, it proposes the formation of artist alliances and shared communities to integrate dispersed artistic forces, establishing more stable development platforms for individuals while seeking new paths for collaborative growth. This cross-regional cooperation model expands opportunities for artists: while isolated individuals may be overwhelmed by rapidly changing markets, close-knit elite groups can stand out with their unique styles and artistic concepts.

One of the most crucial elements in this context is social inclusion, which has proven to be a key survival mechanism for the community. In Songzhuang, social inclusion is not merely about providing space for artistic creation, but about deliberately integrating incoming artists into the local art scene. The area fosters collaboration between newcomers and established artists, encouraging the exchange of ideas and contributing to a more diverse and dynamic cultural environment.

To strengthen this model, Songzhuang could adopt an approach of “leading through excellent artist groups” by establishing artist spaces with master residencies, forming partnerships with university faculty, and offering expert guidance and targeted funding support. These measures would serve artists at different stages of development. By building a professional oil painting industry ecosystem, implementing artistic research, work incubation, advanced training, and related projects, high-quality works can be produced, further enhancing the core competitiveness of the oil painting industry cluster. In addition, the establishment of shared communities is particularly important. Through mutual assistance and resource integration, artists can create in a more inclusive environment, fostering a positive cultural ecology. Li Xianting once advocated converting abandoned village factories into artist communities, such as Songzhuang’s *Lei Yuan*, which provided affordable creative spaces for young female artists. Each unit, ranging from 100 to 170 sqm, included a studio, kitchen, and bedroom, with rent starting at just RMB 80 per sqm. This practice not only addressed artists’ basic living needs but also attracted more emerging creative classes to settle in, bringing “new blood” into Songzhuang and generating continuous vitality (H. Liu, 2012). However, *Lei Yuan*

was demolished due to regional renovation, and artists have since relocated. This regrettable outcome highlights the need for integrating the development of shared art communities into long-term planning, in order to avoid short-lived resource effects.

Meanwhile, this research proposes a transformation in the role of art institutions, attempting to expand their function from traditional exhibition venues into multifunctional platforms that connect artists with audiences and promote both art education and industry development. What makes an excellent exhibition or event? Based on the interviewees’ responses, four key criteria can be summarized: locality, interest, interactivity, and high quality. As the art field gradually shifts from physical to virtual space, methods of art display and experience must become more diverse. As crucial components of the oil painting industry cluster, art galleries, museums, and exhibition spaces should engage in equal dialog and two-way information flow with audiences, inspire deeper audience participation, provide stable market support for artists, and serve as key bridges connecting art with society.

Beyond the artistic sphere, local residents are also invited to participate in the artistic process through non-art-specific activities. Community-oriented art centers and open studios serve as shared platforms for both display and interaction. Public murals and site-specific installations offer opportunities for the neighborhood to co-construct the area’s artistic identity. Residents can observe the artistic production process, engage in conversations with artists, and even participate in co-creation. These interactions lower the threshold for engaging with art, making it more accessible and enjoyable for the broader public.

Thus, social inclusion functions not only as a value of cultural exchange but also as a pathway for the Songzhuang art community to integrate into broader society. It helps dismantle social prejudices against so-called “drifting artists” and bridges the gap between contemporary art and the general public. Art, in this sense, is no longer confined to elite circles but becomes embedded in everyday social life.

Finally, this section focuses on the reshaping of artistic discourse power in the era of self-media. As Chen and Feng (2024) point out, in the traditional art ecosystem, official authorities dominated the discourse in Songzhuang. Even artists who had long been rooted there found it difficult to genuinely express their positions and existential dilemmas, instead becoming objects of capitalist consumption. Today, however, artists showcase their subjectivity through personalized short videos, breaking down outsiders’ stereotypical perceptions of artistic life in Songzhuang. Social media has not only lowered the barriers to artistic

exhibition but also created a “disintermediated” economic model, allowing skilled but previously undiscovered painters to connect with audiences in more autonomous and flexible ways, thereby increasing both exposure and sales of their works. Artists are liberating themselves from being “represented” by others and gradually breaking free from the predicament of having their profits divided by intermediaries. Looking ahead, the oil painting industry cluster can seize this opportunity to establish an integrated online and offline art trading platform and deepen collaboration with livestreaming resources. Meanwhile, artists should be encouraged to challenge mainstream discourse frameworks through personal narratives. Together, these measures will help create an inclusive, flexible, and liberated artistic ecosystem.

5. Conclusion

This research explores survival strategies for oil painting industry clusters, focusing on three key dimensions: space, technology, and communication. Drawing on in-depth interviews with artists, art institution operators, art market professionals, policymakers, and art administrators, and centering on the questions of *where to create*, *how to create*, and *with whom to co-create*, the study proposes specific coping strategies.

First, in response to the spatial constraints inherent to Songzhuang, the findings suggest that incorporating more natural elements and moderately opening studios can improve the creative environment. In addition, the establishment of new creative bases may help alleviate the spatial compression caused by urbanization. Second, in terms of creative practice, the research indicates that artists enhance their competitive edge through dedicated refinement of artistic quality, sustained innovation, and precise market positioning. Third, to address the social stratification within the artist community, the study highlights the importance of forming artist alliances and shared communities that can offer mutual support and security for artists at various stages of their careers. Art institutions are encouraged to actively play multifunctional roles, resisting the disarray that undermines artistic essence, while optimizing the quality of exhibitions and events and balancing cultural functionality with commercial viability. Meanwhile, artists are reclaiming discourse power through self-media platforms, thereby contributing to a more stable support system for the cluster.

The conclusions of the present study may provide valuable insights for other Chinese art districts that are grappling with commercialization pressures, spatial deficiencies, and rising real estate costs. To exemplify, adopting strategies similar to those implemented in Beijing’s

798 Art District or the new wave of creative hubs emerging in Shenzhen may achieve a balance between urbanization and artistic sustainability. Government policies should prioritize space preservation through land use changes, provide rental subsidies for artists, and introduce cultural heritage protection measures. Such initiatives could help mitigate the commercialization pressures experienced in Songzhuang, where the inflow of capital has, at times, displaced the original artistic intent.

While the strategy of optimization and co-construction holds great promise, it should also be evaluated in light of the practical challenges involved in its implementation. The profit-driven interests of developers may conflict with the interests of artists seeking affordable creative spaces. Furthermore, government reforms may progress slowly, thereby hindering timely development. Policy adoption is likely to encounter opposition from multiple stakeholders, and the dynamics of commercial and cultural interests should not be underrated. To address these challenges and support sustainable development, more proactive and targeted government policies are urgently needed.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

This research demonstrates that the survival strategies adopted by the oil painting industry cluster in the Songzhuang art district represent a comprehensive development path, integrating artistic creativity with business operations, competition with cooperation, and legal frameworks with ethical considerations. These findings provide a theoretical contribution to the discourse on the sustainable development of the oil painting industry cluster in similar contexts. The research reveals that the survival strategy of the oil painting industry cluster relies not only on the pursuit of economic benefits but also on a return to respecting the intrinsic value and creativity of individual artists. The state must move beyond traditional models of cultural industry support to offer more nuanced and human-centered policies tailored to the needs of creative communities. Otherwise, a reliance on commercial demolition or one-size-fits-all land-use planning may only accelerate the premature decline and eventual disappearance of art districts. The future of the oil painting industry cluster hinges not only on state-level macro-control but also, and perhaps more critically, on the agency of artists and art institutions. In a constantly evolving market, the creative class must satisfy audience needs through theme-oriented and market-segmented strategies. At the same time, they must achieve resource complementarity and collaborative development by establishing artist alliances and shared communities. Furthermore, art institutions need to shift from a singular focus on art investment to active participation

in both market-driven and public-interest initiatives. By promoting healthy industry operations while adhering to industry standards, they can contribute to a more resilient ecosystem. This research thus points toward a new research direction that consciously resists the erosion of art production by commercial logic and technical rationality, while actively restoring the avant-garde spirit and innovative concepts of the Songzhuang art district. In doing so, it helps safeguard the oil painting industry cluster's dual role in meeting both material and spiritual needs, ensuring that it is not forgotten amid the advances of modern technology.

5.2. Managerial implications

Exploring the survival strategies of the Songzhuang oil painting industry cluster offers a profound reflection on the relationship between art and commerce, and between culture and society. Since 2004, although the state has introduced a series of survival strategies for creative industry clusters, these measures have neither provided specific guidance for the oil painting industry nor effectively addressed key issues such as insufficient market adaptability, a lack of creative diversity, and limitations in artists' self-innovation capabilities.

The findings and recommendations of this research carry significant managerial implications for painters, art institution operators, policymakers, cultural event organizers, and other relevant administrators in the Songzhuang art district. Specifically, the proposed strategies aim to improve the working and living conditions of artists, optimize the operational environment of galleries and museums, and promote more efficient organization and implementation of cultural activities. By strengthening collaboration and interaction within the oil painting industry cluster, these measures are expected to enhance cohesion and a sense of belonging within the Songzhuang art district, thereby improving its overall stability. These strategies are not only intended to help the creative class secure living space and livelihood but also more importantly, to safeguard the district's essential nature of art cultivation, ensuring that the oil painting industry cluster does not become subordinate to power and capital.

5.3. Limitations of the study and future research directions

The present study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample primarily consisted of 20 artists and professionals with rich professional backgrounds from the Songzhuang art district. While this sample size enabled in-depth qualitative analysis, it may have excluded the perspectives of less experienced

creators or those on the periphery of the art community, limiting a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity and complexity within the oil painting industry cluster. Future research should incorporate a broader and more representative sample, including artists from varied educational backgrounds, technical skill levels, and financial situations, to improve the representativeness and generalizability of the research findings.

Second, the interviews conducted in this study did not fully integrate the entire industry chain into the core analysis, focusing primarily on the current survival status of oil painting creators. Due to time and funding limitations, there was insufficient investigation into the business operations of oil painting material suppliers, sales organizations, and related supporting services. Future research should broaden its perspective and conduct in-depth investigations into these seemingly peripheral yet equally crucial components.

Third, although the use of semi-structured interviews and participatory observation helped us gain deep insight into individual experiences, the proposed concept of "survival strategies of the oil painting industry cluster" remains underdeveloped in terms of theoretical foundation. To strengthen this concept both academically and practically, future research should incorporate more quantitative data from additional real-world settings. Comparative and interdisciplinary approaches will also be important to further refine and validate the theoretical framework.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (JKEUPM) of Universiti Putra Malaysia (Reference No.: JKEUPM-2024-282). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

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Not applicable.

Availability of data

Data used in this work are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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