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Improbable Art: The Creative Economy and Sustainable Cluster Development in a Hong Kong Industrial District

Lily Kong

Singapore Management University, lilykong@smu.edu.sg

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**Improbable Art:
Sustainable Cluster Development
in a Hong Kong Industrial District**

**Lily Kong
Professor of Geography
National University of Singapore**

Hong Kong's Fotan: an unlikely arts cluster in an unlikely city

In the light industrial district of Fotan, a suburb of Sha Tin District in the New Territories of Hong Kong, a number of art studios scattered across several factory buildings bear a quiet reputation as an organic part of Hong Kong's local arts scene. Numbering between 80 and 100 studios and well over 200 artists in 2010-11, the area comprising factory buildings began sporting a handful of arts studios round about the year 2000. Among the pioneers were Lam Tung Pang, Tozer Pak and their classmates from nearby Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), all in search of cheap space in which they could practice their art. As students, they could ill afford studio rentals. They turned to their mentor at CUHK, Victor Lui Chun Kwong. The fine arts professor bought a floor of units in an industrial building in Fotan and began renting them out to his students. It was a time when the property market in Hong Kong was slow, and factory spaces emptied out as manufacturing shifted to the cheaper southern provinces of China. The units in factory buildings like Wah Lok and Wah Luen in Fotan became very affordably priced. Rumours have it that the professor bought several units within three hours, and rented them out to his students in as quick a time. Not long after, in 2003, as Sars (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) broke and claimed lives in various cities around the world, including Hong Kong, the property market in the city dropped still further. The professor bought more units and rented them out to still more students. Others followed suit, purchasing and renting space from grateful landlords and owners whose units would otherwise have stayed empty.

Hong Kong is not usually a place associated with rich culture and thriving arts. Instead, it is better known as a centre of commerce, finance and telecommunications. Its recent branding efforts have focused on establishing itself as "Asia's world city", a positioning "designed to highlight Hong Kong's existing strengths in areas such as financial services, trade, tourism, transport,

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communications, and as a regional hub for international business and a major city in China” (<http://www.info.gov.hk/info/sar5/easia.htm>). Its 2001 Brand Hong Kong programme, intended as the platform to promote itself internationally as Asia’s world city, was focused primarily on economic opportunity and entrepreneurship. As a corollary, the programme acknowledged the significance of culture. The focus, however, was on hardware – the plan was to develop “world-class cultural infrastructure” in the form of a new 40-hectare arts district (the West Kowloon Cultural District, facing the central business district on Hong Kong Island). The plan proclaimed that the district would be a “cultural oasis” (<http://www.info.gov.hk/info/sar5/easia.htm>), designed to “enrich the lives of Hong Kong residents, attract visitors from neighbouring cities and enhance even further one of the most beautiful skylines in the world with a new, distinguished landmark” (<http://www.info.gov.hk/info/sar5/easia.htm>). The reference to a “cultural oasis” amounts to a self-acknowledgement of the relative lack of a thriving arts scene in this Special Administrative Region of China. It is in this context that Fotan, as a site for artists, must be understood. It is, by far, one of the most organically evolved spaces for the arts in the city, developing beyond the official gaze which has been trained on mega-projects and cultural infrastructure.

In as much as Hong Kong is an unlikely city for organic development of the arts, Fotan is an unlikely place to find an arts cluster. Artists are located amidst surviving industries, so that unlike many other arts clusters in Asia where the cluster is exclusively used by artists and related workers (such as theatre groups, galleries, photographers and the like), the artists here are located alongside commercial storage businesses, food processing factories, garment and textile wholesalers, and computer peripheral manufacturers. Between 2008 and 2010, on occasions when I visited, I would continue to traipse past factories producing roast meat and fish balls, hardware stores and factories with evidence of woodwork and metalwork, before getting to meet an artist in his or her paint or sculpture studio. This means that the artists are simultaneously dispersed and clustered – dispersed throughout the several factory buildings in Fotan, but concentrated in the Fotan industrial estate. This departs from the likes of the well-known 798 district (or Dashanzi) in Beijing and the iconic Moganshan Lu in Shanghai, where the factories have all completely exited, and entire factory buildings have been taken over by cultural/creative workers (only).

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Given the unlike(ly) nature of the Fotan arts cluster, it presents an excellent opportunity for a close ethnographic examination of its character and dynamics, and through grounded analysis, advance existing theoretical understandings of arts and cultural clusters. Hitherto, there have been efforts to conceptualize and categorize clusters, including cultural/creative clusters (e.g. Bassett et al., 2002; Mommaas, 2004; Evans et al., 2005; and Flew, 2005; see Kong, 2012). However, conceptual models are often built on theoretical logics not always grounded in indepth ethnographic analysis of empirical phenomena, leave alone in different parts of the world and under different circumstances where different logics may prevail. There is a severe shortage of micro-level analyses of cultural/creative clusters at ground level, and theory built up from there. This paper is motivated by a desire to contribute to the micro-level understanding of a particular site, in the hope of contributing towards a more refined and robust theory of arts (cultural/creative) clusters.

Moving forward, the paper will be organized as follows. I will begin by outlining received wisdom on the nature of clusters, with logics often assumed to apply to arts and cultural clusters. I will then highlight more recent efforts to refine and rethink cultural/creative clusters, demonstrating how they differ from other types of clusters (e.g. business and industrial clusters). Following this, I will provide an account and analysis of three dimensions of Fotan as an arts cluster: (a) cultural sustainability; (b) social sustainability; and (c) economic sustainability.¹ Finally, I attempt to add to a grounded theory of arts and cultural clusters.

The nature of clusters

Co-location of specialized industries, or what is fashionably termed “clusters” in academic and policy circles today, is not new. The phenomenon has been acknowledged since 1890, with the writings of Alfred Marshall who noted the “concentration of specialised industries in particular localities” (Martin and Sunley, 2003). Since then and in more recent years especially, a number of

¹ This material is based on 52 interviews that were conducted in Hong Kong in 2009 and 2010. Twenty-six of these were with Fotan artists and gallery owners while the rest were with other artists in Hong Kong who were not based at Fotan. Additionally, visits were timed to coincide with the open studio festival known as Fotanian in both years, which facilitated observations of artist interactions (among themselves and with visitors), and conversations with about 20 visitors.

authors have attempted to develop conceptualizations of such concentrations. Most of the literature has focused on industrial or business clusters, which have drawn the attention of many policy makers seeking to promote national, regional and local competitiveness, innovation and growth. Drawing particularly on the work of Porter (1998, 2000), the following refrain has been used repeatedly about the benefits of clustering: it delivers higher rates of innovation because it allows rapid perception of new buyer needs; it concentrates knowledge and information; facilitates ongoing relationships with other institutions including universities; allows rapid assimilation of new technological possibilities; and provides richer insights into new management practices (Simmie, 2004:1096). Much attention has also been paid to transaction cost advantages and increasing returns to scale that arise from clustering, as well as less measurable benefits such as the building up of social capital (Fukuyama, 1995), tacit knowledge and informal networks, and the “cafeteria effect” (Konstadakopoulos, 2000). This adds to the explosion of literature that acknowledges how inter-firm learning is facilitated with concentrations of firms, institutions, and labour; and how interactions between different agencies, including government agencies are enhanced; and how understanding of client needs are sharpened (see, for example, Grabher, 1993; Amin and Thrift, 1994; Scott, 1996, 2001; Storper, 1997, Scheff, 2001; Cooke, 2002).

How might all of this be relevant to arts clusters? It is a question that deserves to be asked, but which has been elided once too often. As an instantiation of the cultural/creative cluster, the arts cluster is similarly conflated with business and industrial clusters, and subjected to the same economic analysis and policy response as other industries. This is unsatisfactory as many creative clusters are “de facto cultural quarters with assorted cultural consumption and not for profit activities” (Evans *et al.*, 2005:26), thus meriting evaluation through a different lens. Certainly, in the case of Fotan, many of the artists are less the entrepreneurs and business men and women that conventional cluster analysis would make them out to be (and which treat them as if they just happen to be in the art business/industry, the specific nature of their work almost incidental). Yet, the nature of their work *is* different; indeed, for many of them, the “work” is a labour of love, a form of self-expression, indeed, an indulgence, often engaged in after a long day’s work in some other business or industry. Many do not actively seek to sell their works, though they would

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welcome that as one form of affirmation of the quality of their work, and many are somewhat new to and unfamiliar with the world of galleries and agents.

Efforts to improve our conceptual understanding of cultural/creative clusters have drawn attention to the following distinguishing dimensions. The first is an acknowledgement that location is not only about a physical coordinate, or indeed about relative location, that is, location in relation to other activities. Instead, it is about “[t]he particular traditions, conventions and skills that exist in any given urban area [that] help to infuse local products with an exclusive aura that can be imitated by firms in other places but never completely reproduced” (Scott, 2006:10). Location is thus about the unique character of a place that shapes the nature of the cultural product. Where a cultural cluster exists matters, because it moulds the specific identity and character of the cultural product, whether it is music, art, or poetry.

The second distinguishing quality of cultural/creative clusters is the fact that cultural producers need to be ‘inside’ the circuit of knowledge where “insiders’ knowledge and immersion in the local scene produce the vital innovations and mutations” (O’Connor, 2004:136) because the unique “style, .. look, .. sound” of “local culture” cannot be transmitted formally as codified knowledge. The (re)production of a cultural product is dependent on such a nuanced and tacit understanding of the qualities of a place and the character of a product.

The third dimension of cultural/creative clusters debunks the commonly accepted assumptions that clusters, by virtue of geographical propinquity, invariably generate trust relationships amongst constituents, thus facilitating the building up of social capital, yielding fruitful externalities and creative synergies that enhance the work produced. Evidence suggests that such social ties and the resulting social capital are not invariable outcomes of spatial proximity. Indeed, empirical analyses suggest that they develop in cultural clusters under certain conditions that are not related to the fact of geographical propinquity, for example, when there is a need to counter external forces through collective action (Kong, 2009a, 2011). Rather than agglomerating to enjoy productive social relations, evidence suggests that other factors like the reputation effect of a cluster, the salubrious environment and affordable rentals are more persuasive

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in attracting and retaining cultural workers (Kong, 2009a). Indeed, because of the individual nature of artistic creation, collaboration and cooperation is less critical than (the vertical and horizontal) linkages in industry.

The fourth dimension of cultural/creative clusters that prior ethnographic work in Hong Kong (Kong, 2011) reveals is the importance of the governance of culture and urban space in the future sustainability of a cultural/creative cluster. When such governance is fractured, with responsibilities overlapping, where different agencies take different stances with little inter-agency coordination, the cluster's sustainability is jeopardised. The question of governance of clusters is an important one that I will return to in the analysis of Fotan.

In the next three sections, I will use the analysis of Fotan to understand how artistic work in this industrial site has been surprisingly sustainable -- culturally, socially and economically, despite some signs of challenges. The detailed analysis of this site will enable further clarifications of an emerging theory of cultural/creative clusters, as distinct from business and industrial ones.

Cultural sustainability

Cultural sustainability in the context of cultural/creative clusters has been defined in terms of the ability to support the development of indigenous art and the evolution of a local idiom (Kong, 2009b). Quite as important is an understanding of cultural sustainability in terms of the continued ability for cultural workers to engage in their cultural work, and the conditions that support the specific nature of that cultural work. In this regard, the artists at Fotan are optimistic about the cluster's cultural sustainability, despite some less than ideal conditions. Specifically, many artists were highly positive about the geography of Fotan, repeatedly pointing to two aspects of the physical environment that facilitated the specific nature of their artistic work: the physical space available, and the relative location.

The physical space available at Fotan is a significant factor contributing to the cluster's cultural sustainability. The high roofs and spacious units facilitate the work of artists. As one of them explained:

With this unit, I've got quite a high roof and that makes a huge difference. I mean, you can find empty places like this in Kwun

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Tong or Chai Wan, but you don't get the space, so I can't do my big pieces of work (Personal interview, 12 February 2009).

Another expresses delight at the high ceilings and bare concrete floors – “something I've been looking for my whole life” (Personal interview, 14 February 2009). A third echoes his approval:

Yes because you see my painting is quite large so I can't work at my home or another place, or my office. I must have a large place to work in because with big paintings, it is very easy to dirty the floor. You also need to be able to step back and view the large piece in its entirety, and you can't do that within a small space (Personal interview, 15 January 2010).

While the conditions of support for artistic work are more usually thought of in social, cultural and political terms (e.g. a vibrant social milieu, a deep cultural heritage, an open political condition), the Fotan artists are a reminder that a very fundamental condition for sustaining certain artistic work is having appropriate physical space. In this respect, the factory buildings offer a related advantage: there are huge industrial lifts that allow the artists' materials to be transported to their studios easily. As one artist explained:

Very often, I need to carry the four-foot poles, eight-foot poles that I sometimes like to work with, so this space fits us because the lifts can fit. You can't find this in many places. Furthermore, the store is just next to my building, so it's fantastic (Personal interview, 15 January 2010).

This final comment draws attention to the second quality about Fotan's geography that the artists value, and which plays an important role in its cultural sustainability: its relative location, valuable in two ways. First, its proximity to existing light industries has provided a much needed source of material for the artists. Many who do woodwork speak about the ability to purchase materials like wood from the nearby hardware store. The electrical stores in the vicinity have also served some of the artists well, with one learning his welding skills from the workers there. As one of the artists summarised it:

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I love the synergy here -- there is an odd assortment of small steel, plastic and wood fabrication factories in the area and I can get help with my own work (Personal interview, 17 January 2010).

A second consideration in terms of relative location has to do with the studios' co-location with a range of factories. The very grittiness of the physical space by virtue of the proximity with factories is what makes the place interesting for artists. As one gallery owner explained:

We are in this industrial space, and the first time you arrive, most people will be like, what the hell is this? It is dirty, it is smelly, it smells like fishballs on one floor, it smells like barbequed pork on the top, and they are like ... what is this space? But it is always these kinds of places that tend to be one of the best spaces for artists to be creative and do their thing. And you know beautiful things come out of it (Personal interview, 17 February 2009).

For artists to be able to do their art, the very basic condition is to have the right kinds of spaces in locations that are interesting and that provide easy access to materials. These are so fundamental that they are not often remembered, leave alone constitute part of analysis. Yet, the combination of physical space and location is a critical prerequisite for artistic work to be sustainable, the lack of which will detract from the ability to produce specific types of art. In Fotan, these fundamental conditions of artistic and cultural sustainability are addressed.

Social sustainability

A big part of the sustainability of Fotan is the sense of support that comes with the social interactions within the space and with those in the vicinity. Reflecting some of the arguments that have emerged within the cluster literature (Mommas, 2004; O'Connor, 2004), artists and others in the area speak about the increased interactions amongst themselves by virtue of their proximate location, and the accompanying sense of support. More often than not, such relationships buttress a sense of community rather than engender particular creative synergies that impact on the actual artistic outcome.

Just what is the nature of these social ties, and how are they important for the sustainability of the cluster? The first thing to note is what it is not. This is

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not the “chumminess of a studio complex or an arts school in an American city”, as one artist is quick to point out (Personal interview, 1 May 2009). “That kind of feeling of having everybody, all night long, wandering into each other’s studios, having a beer, playing video games ... that’s not quite the way it is here. People are pretty professional about their art here, even if it’s something that they are doing as a hobby late at night or on the weekends. It’s more serious, so the sense of interaction and connection is different.”

The social relations and interactions among the Fotan art community have their own complexion. The first feature is rooted in its very genesis as described in this paper’s introduction, which has made pre-existing ties among the artists (by virtue of their links with the Chinese University of Hong Kong) very significant. Indeed, at the beginning and for a few years thereafter, it was estimated that more than half of the artists who had units in Fotan were graduates, students or faculty from the university. Many were friends, and either shared a studio, or rented/bought units in close proximity to one another. As one graduate of CUHK explained:

There are several studios in these two buildings that I often go to. One has my former lecturer. There are a couple of other units on the fourth floor of Block A that I hang around because they are fresh graduates and we are about the same age, so we have a common thinking, and I will go down there to chat (Personal interview, 1 May 2009).

Indeed, because the studios are spread over several buildings in the industrial district, the sense of community traverses some physical distance, aided by existing social ties, rendering tight co-location (that is, absolute contiguity) unnecessary.

Second, the linkages are not only within the cluster. Fotan’s proximity to Chinese University of Hong Kong also ensures that the continuing ties between the arts community at Fotan and the fine arts faculty and enrolled students continue. The artistic interactions and sense of support serves as a continuing encouragement to the Fotan community. According to a recent graduate:

As we are still close to our professors and former classmates, I know that there are people nearby who appreciate what we are

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doing and our art. We have a good sense of creative energy here, and also with our friends in university nearby. This is very good for our morale and helps us to continue with our work, knowing that the art community is right here (Personal interview, 13 August 2010).

Third, apart from the pre-existing linkages and the ties back to the university, the ability to meet new artists in one place and many of them at that, provides opportunities to interact, share ideas and learn new things. The large numbers are attractive. As one of the most established artists there commented,

It is good that here, you meet more often with other artists. Before I moved here, when I was still living in my small flat trying to do some work, I could only meet artists in public settings. Here, you know this is a different situation. You have many artists here in their work environment. You meet them right there where they are doing their art (Personal interview, 17 January 2009).

The ability to meet many artists is similarly welcomed by many other artists located in Fotan, but also by those not located there. As one sculptor located elsewhere commented: "I head to Fotan to visit my seniors and fellow artists often, and chit chat with them in their studios" (Personal interview, 18 January 2009). The openness to other artists not based there is reflected in accounts of foreign artists visiting as well. A Singaporean artist based there noted:

What I have been able to do is to be very open about meeting the artists here. I've not finished meeting all of them. When there are visitors, some of the foreign artists might be staying over, and they might give a talk or a performance, and I will participate and meet people there (Personal interview, 1 May 2009).

Fourth, the interactions are not only confined to artists. The sense of community is more broadly felt because of friendly ties with non-artists in the vicinity. The same Singaporean artist based in Fotan noted that

... the security guards at Fotan actually know about the artists, whereas in Singapore, you would never find the art museum staff interested in the art works, not to mention to know anything about them. But here the security guard knows in detail what the artist

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does and where the artist is. So that was shocking to me (Personal interview, 1 May 2009).

Other artists speak positively of the building management, and how it made extra efforts to keep the place cleaner and more salubrious for the artists as the numbers grew, including cleaning the lobby and improving the image of the buildings.

Fifth, particular activities have been helpful in generating opportunities for interaction. This includes the arrival of galleries in Fotan and the organization of Fotanian, (nearly) an annual event since the first small-scale informal beginnings in 2001 in which the artists open their studios to the public over several days. As one artist observed, the opening of galleries in Fotan has created the opportunity for “some connection with different studios”, as artists bring their works to the galleries. More significantly, Fotanian has enhanced the interaction among studios, as artists invite one another to visit their studios. While not everyone will participate, the numbers that do are significant. In 2008, 34 studios and more than 160 artists took part, a big growth from the original three or four studios in 2001. Indeed, the event affords the opportunity to bring artists, art lovers and the curious public to the cluster, and in thus acknowledging its existence, endorses its place in Hong Kong’s art world. As one artist pointed out,

By also attracting them to come to our studios, they will see our artworks, the environment that we are working in, and I think that they will appreciate more about what we do, and that when they see that there is a cluster of people doing it, not just one or two, but a cluster, I think it will make them think that maybe there is something happening, there is really something that is really driving us doing what we do now. And I guess that would encourage them to appreciate more about the creative industry, about art, about something that is not mundane, it is not something that they see everyday, it is not mass production, it is not about that (Personal interview, 16 February 2009).

Sixth, perhaps the evidence of a mature community is the fact that not everyone feels the need to be constantly in touch with other Fotan artists to feel like they belong to a community and share a certain sense of identity. A full-time

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engineer who works on her art at Fotan on weekday evenings and weekends explains that the time is precious for her:

When I come back, I have to make the best use of my time to do my art. We do see each other, I do bump into other artists and sometimes I go and visit my neighbour next door, or Mike in the next block and my other friends, but normally I would just come back and do work. But knowing that they are around makes the place feel like an art community (Personal interview, 15 February 2009).

This is repeated in many ways by different artists:

We always work overnight and the building is so quiet, and you can be alone, but if you just imagine that there is someone in the next unit still working like you, you feel much encouraged (Personal interview, 17 January 2010).

Although you don't have much contact with the other artists, it is a nice feeling to know they are nearby (Personal interview, 16 January 2010).

I think this is the sense of a cluster. It is a kind of connection you have with other artists or other art galleries or other people that are involved in this circle even if you don't know them or interact with them. That's important, because we get support from each other (Personal interview, 1 May 2009).

Especially when you are a new artist, you really need some kind of community for your development. Knowing of other people who are struggling like you really helps your motivation (Personal interview, 2 May 2009).

All of the artists here, they don't always see each other, they don't always communicate, but it is inspiring knowing that you are not there painting alone, there are other people there and you are not alone (Personal interview, 13 January 2009).

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These expressions are reminiscent of two concepts: of “imagined community” as Ben Anderson famously introduced, and “existence value” that economists have used in other contexts. The former is well known to mean a community that is not (and cannot be) based on everyday face-to-face interaction among members, but is based instead of an “image of ... communion” (1991:224). The latter is a sense that utility comes from simply knowing a resource exists. In this case, even the fact that “there are artists in Fotan who have never spoken to artists from other studios because they don’t want to disturb others” does not diminish the knowledge and sentiment that there is a “group of like-minded people in this community” (Personal interview, 13 January 2009). The fact that the number of artists has simply grown over the years also means that even if people are not consciously looking for fellow artists to interact with in their studios, they will still run into each other, such as in the lift lobby, or in the food stalls or hardware stalls nearby. The serendipitous encounters are quite as important in the development of a sense of community.

The many positive perspectives notwithstanding, the social sustainability of the cluster is not unchallenged. Two factors put a limit on the upbeat experiences discussed above. The first is the lack of pre-existing ties for some, and the second is the lack of a common space. While the strength of social ties in Fotan is in part built on the pre-existing relationships, this factor is also its weakness. One of the artists commented on being an “outsider”, that is, not a university-mate of other artists:

I think for a lot of the artists in the studios, they’re like classmates, they’ve been to school together, they’ve been working with each other for several years, so I think they naturally tend to collaborate more. I didn’t go to school with any of these artists, and so if we did collaborate, we tend to collaborate with others not in that circle (Personal interview, 19 January 2009).

Another artist from the US spoke about being an outsider despite being Chinese:

I think I still find my place as a bit of an outsider, not having been brought up here, or not having direct ties *per se* to this place prior to the two years I’ve been here. So a lot of the collaborations that do happen have been within the local community, people who have been specifically tied to Hong Kong, attended institutions in Hong

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Kong. Partly cos of that reason I still, even though I've been welcome, to a certain extent I still feel like an outsider to some extent (Personal interview, 20 January 2010).

Artists also comment on the lack of a common space, the existence of which could enhance interactions even more. An artist and a gallery owner shared their ideas:

It would be a nice development I think if there is also an arts space and also if there would be space where people can get together and have more communication, like some kind of café, or a place where they can buy materials, can have a coffee. So they can meet, because sometimes their studios are crowded. Or it is just hard, you don't know who is there, but if you go to the café for a drink, you might meet some other people there, so it might improve the communication and I think that would be quite a good development (Personal interview, 20 January 2010).

We have always said that it would be perfect if there was a cafeteria or canteen where everybody would go. Now people come here mainly for very practical reasons, low rent, industrial support, for example. But this is the very basic, and you need them anyway. But if you want to have the dynamic, you probably need to have something beyond these basic needs. I would imagine, like a very user-friendly environment for people to really meet, to exchange and so on (Personal interview, 1 May 2009).

The significance of these voices to the theorization of social sustainability and cultural/creative clusters is the attention they draw to the importance of a sense of both grounded (real) as well as imagined community to the social sustainability of such clusters. The former is facilitated greatly by pre-existing ties and highlights the important contributions to companionship and friendship that make the cluster socially sustainable. Even without the former, the latter is significant, for the sense that there are artists close by, working away in the solitude of their studios and the dark of the night, spurs the artists' morale, encouraging them in their pursuits. In this sense, the cluster which generates such a sense of imagined community is one that is socially sustainable.

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Economic sustainability

Much as clusters thrive when the specific nature of artistic activity is supported (cultural sustainability), and important though it is to have healthy social interactions and/or an imagined community (social sustainability), another key dimension of sustainability is the economic viability of the clusters. Little has been written about this dimension of cultural/creative cluster sustainability. Exceptionally, in an analysis of the viability and character of a Shanghai arts cluster (Moganshan Lu), Kong (2009b) drew attention to the double-edged sword of increasing commercialisation of clusters, which comes with increasing rentals and growing recognition and popularity of the cluster. On the one hand, such commercialisation (in the form of establishment of galleries, with attendant retail and trading activities) increases the economic activity (and possibly sustainability) of the cluster. It attracts art lovers looking for new art, and new artists who see the commercialisation as an opportunity to introduce their works to the market. On the other hand, it discourages some artists from remaining or setting up studios there, viewing the cluster as a commercial development rather than a creative cluster. The commercial activity thus augurs well for the economic sustainability of the cluster, the “opportunity of incorporating cultural consumption” enabling the site to be “sustainably reproduced as one of artistic production”. Yet, it “can threaten to erode the cluster’s cultural sustainability” since some of the established artists may choose to move away (Kong, 2009b:10).

Fotan’s situation in Hong Kong exhibits both similar and different characteristics from that observed by Kong (2009b). As with Moganshan Lu, there are growing rentals at Fotan. They are both a condition of the growing popularity of the sites, and the fluctuating property market. Various artists cited rental hikes between 25% and 150% from 2003 to 2008. For those seeking to buy the properties, the hikes were even more stark, with some citing a 400% increase between 2003 and 2008, and about 200% between 2006 and 2008. As the original reason that prompted rental of these units – cheap rentals – became eroded, some artists began to move away (to other industrial areas such as Tsuen Wan or Chai Wan). In place, richer artists and ‘yuppies’ began to move into Fotan, which, in the view of one of the earliest pioneers, began to “change the dynamics of the artist community” (Personal interview, 13 January 2009). Another pioneer artist believes that the later artists also relocated to Fotan

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because they were attracted by the increasing popularity of the site, and saw the opportunity to exhibit their works, in addition to producing their works there. This differed from the earlier artists who were not so much driven by exhibition and commercial opportunities. The opening of galleries in Fotan elicited mixed reactions. To some, particularly the newer artists,

It's good for us, because you have more chance to get rich with the galleries. In the past, you just go with the professor and take advice as to which gallery to go with, but now, you can handle the proposal yourself directly with the gallery right here (Personal interview, 28 January 2009).

On the other hand, some other artists believed that the galleries would further contribute to rental hikes in the district, since they operated as businesses, and landlords would be inclined to price the units higher with them. This would ultimately be unhelpful to artists looking for affordable spaces. In these ways, Hong Kong's Fotan demonstrates the same dilemmas that emerged in Shanghai's Moganshan Lu, of the balance between economic opportunities and viability, and cultural sustainability.

Two key differences, however, emerge between the two sites, rooted in geography and governance. Unlike Moganshan Lu, located centrally by the Suzhou Creek in Shanghai's Puxi area, Fotan is relatively isolated in the New Territories. Fotan's location has simultaneously kept it from becoming more commercialized (thus retaining more of the original artists than is the case in Moganshan Lu), while also attracting some moderate commercial activity (though not to the same extent as in the Shanghai site). As one of the gallery owners in Fotan admits, the space is not so ideal:

It is not very effective as a showroom or an exhibition room, because as a showroom it is too far away from the central business district, too far from Central. And if I have it as an exhibition room, nobody comes, except for these two weekends. And it is really just for showing, it is not a commercial exhibition (Personal interview, 15 January 2010).

Like him, one of the artists acknowledges that it is difficult to get people to visit Fotan: "... especially because people get caught in their own little circuit and

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they consider Fotan to be really far away, although it's not" (Personal interview, 15 January 2010). While the gallery owner notes an increasing number of collectors who visit Fotan, "the artists can't decide how to put a price tag on their works" so the full commercial feasibility is not yet exploited. On the other hand, another gallery owner believes that the Fotan location has helped:

I have been pleasantly surprised by people turning up, the attention I received from friends, from people interested in art, from the press. I think more than if I had started out in Central (Personal interview, 16 January 2010).

The verdict may be summarized as follows: there is some commercialization with mixed outcomes, but because of the location (and distance from the heart of the city), the artists generally still find the spaces more affordable than elsewhere in Hong Kong. In other words, the geography of Fotan has helped it to balance between an original authenticity and a seemingly inevitable commercialisation that comes with greater popularity and rental hikes.

A second difference is related to governance of the space. In the case of Moganshan Lu, the municipal authorities recognized the growing popularity of the site and took over, adopting the old factory spaces as one of the creative districts in Shanghai, alongside some 100 others, all part of the push to promote creative industries in the city (Kong, 2009b). It was even christened with a new name – M50 – part of the rebranding that came with the transformation of an organic cluster into one governed by the municipality.

Like Moganshan Lu, Fotan began without deliberate planning, and followed a natural evolutionary path over time. Unlike Moganshan Lu, however, the authorities have not adopted the site. Indeed, the use of factory spaces for artistic activities remains something the authorities turn a blind eye on. As one tenant reveals, there cannot but be awareness of the alternative uses (artistic, and even residential) to which some of the spaces have been put, but the authorities have not sought to enforce regulations. Others are less sanguine, and worried about whether their "illegal" use of the space would be discovered. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that there are no attempts to regulate. This may have been aided by the fact that the site has not been adopted as part of Hong Kong's creative industry agenda, which has focused very much on design,

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film, television, music, animation, digital entertainment and such, rather than the fine arts (http://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/creative_industries.pdf). In this way, the official economic imperative has not exerted its agendas on the site, which has allowed it to remain relatively organic in form and evolutionary direction. The absence of an official economic imperative and thus the lack of new governance from the authorities has helped the cluster retain its independent directions of evolution, thus far, with positive implications for its sustainability.

Conclusions

Fotan exemplifies an improbable site for the practice and development of art while Hong Kong represents an unlikely place for a thriving arts scene, given its close and longstanding association with commerce rather than culture. Yet, this unlikely arts cluster in an unlikely city has provided us with much useful grist for the analytical mill, and allows us to refine our theory of cultural/creative clusters further on the basis of grounded empirical work. This is very important, given the ways in which city governments in many parts of the world are embracing with (oftentimes unquestioning) enthusiasm the benefits of such clusters, and are setting them up on the assumption that they work like business and industry clusters.

Fotan draws to our attention three characteristics of arts clusters that shape their development and sustainability: their genesis, geography and governance. First, Fotan's genesis has linked it inexorably to pre-existing sets of relationships; its sustainability is encouraged and supported by these social ties that often go beyond professional acquaintanceship; there is a sense of community among the artists, many of whom have known one another before (re)locating to the cluster. Here, Fotan demonstrates that the spontaneous social relationships and strong reciprocal bonds described by the German scholar Tönnies in his concept of *gemeinschaft* are important in this arts cluster's sustainability. Their significance stems not from resultant interdependencies, creative synergies, or externalities, but simply because of the moral and social support that artists (young ones especially) appreciate as they pursue what is, at the end of the day, an individual journey in artistic discovery and development. The pre-existing relationships ease "entry" into the cluster, facilitate comfortable social interactions, and build a sense of community. Yet, precisely because the

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social relations are more significant for moral support than for active collaboration in artistic work, clustering is also important for the arts even if the artists do not get together (frequently or at all), because the idea/knowledge that there are others nearby who are walking the same journey is moral support enough. This is the imagined community of the artists, and the existence value that they appreciate. This understanding helps us depart from the received wisdom about clustering, where the assumed benefits are about strong interactions and ties that lead to externalities and more creative, innovative and productive outcomes. For artists engaged largely in individual creative endeavours, the close linkages and interdependencies that might be important in business and industry clusters are less important, but the commonality of purpose and moral support feature more significantly.

Second, the geography of the cluster is crucially important in influencing its development and sustainability. This refers to location and physical space. Location influences the cluster's openness and accessibility and hence sustainability. Physical space influences (even determines) the kind of artistic work that can be accomplished, and hence the very nature of the artistic/cultural work undertaken.

Finally, the governance of a cluster determines whether it is able to develop organically or whether it is subject to multiple external forces (friendly or otherwise to the development of art and space). Fotan has not been co-opted into the government's creative industry agenda and has thus maintained its status as an organically evolved cluster, largely sustained because of the attraction of affordable rentals, suitable spaces, and a supportive milieu (whether in terms of actual friendly relations among the artists and their neighbours or an imagined community among the artists). The artists are loosely organized, if at all, usually during the Open Studios season known as Fotanian. Otherwise, there are no committees, no external agencies to interface with, and no pressure to become something else according to a preconceived script about what a "cultural/creative cluster" should look like or be. This general freedom to evolve and develop, if sustained, augurs well for the natural maturation of the cluster.

My objectives in this paper have been simple. Where theories about cultural/creative clusters have been (too often unreflectively) partial to business

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and industry models, I have sought to add to a small but growing number of ethnographically rich studies of cultural/creative clusters, in order to review and revise existing wisdom about the nature of such clusters. Such advancement in our theoretical understanding of clusters is critical, not least because of increasing interest among policy-makers to adopt the “cluster model” in their own decision-making. There is no “short cut” to robust theory building; the accumulation of deep, grounded, detailed analyses of multiple clusters, of which this study is one, can only add to a stronger theory of cultural/creative clusters.

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