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## THE MIRROR IMAGE OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART: A STUDY OF THE HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND DEVELOPMENTAL PATH OF SONGZHUANG ARTS VILLAGE

Qin Wanxin\* & Dzul Afiq Zakaria\*\*

\*First author, \*\*Corresponding author

Visual Art and Culture Studies, Faculty of Creative Arts,  
Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
(rva180011@um.edu.my, dzulafiq\_zakaria@um.edu.my)

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### Abstract

This paper takes Songzhuang arts village as the object of study, to sort out its historical changes since its formation and use it as an entry point to observe the development of Chinese contemporary art. The study adopts the narrative inquiry approach, through in-depth interviews with four artists who have lived in Songzhuang at different stages of its history, and combines archival research and field work to analyze the relationship between individual experience and the development of contemporary art in China. With the help of Pierre Bourdieu's *field* theory, this paper considers Songzhuang as an art field, revealing the evolution of its internal structure. By analyzing Songzhuang as a spatial sample, this paper attempts to provide a new perspective for understanding the mechanisms and paths of contemporary art development in China, and to envision the potential role of Songzhuang arts village in China's art ecology in the future.

**Keywords:** Chinese contemporary art history, Arts village, Songzhuang arts village, Chinese contemporary artists, Field theory

### Introduction

Songzhuang arts village, which is known as *Huajia* village or *Yishu* village in Chinese, had embraced its first batch of artists in 1993 (JianHua Kong, 2017) since Yuanmingyuan painter's village, the first arts village in China, was demolished by the local government. Since Yuanmingyuan painter's village was demolished in early 1990s, there were multiple arts villages gradually formed all over China. Among all the arts villages, Songzhuang arts village is "China's largest original art cradle"<sup>1</sup>. It

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1. Data accessed from official website "Creative Tongzhou", Tongzhou District People's Government of Beijing

provides places for artists as residences, where artists can create, exhibit and sell their art works. Actually, Songzhuang arts village cannot be recognized as a village from the perspective of Beijing Municipality's administrative division. Songzhuang arts village should be called Songzhuang Zhen (town) actually. Songzhuang Town located in the northern part of To2 au New Town in Tongzhou Qu (district) in Beijing. Songzhuang covers an area of 116 kmes, Xiaond administers 47 administrative villages, 22 villages have artists lived in. Among these villagngzhopu is the most concentrated village with artists. By the year 2018, there were more than 5000 artists living in Songzhuang. More than 30 art museums, over 200 galleries and more than 4500 artist studios are located in Songzhuang<sup>2</sup>. At the beginning of Songzhuang arts village was formed, based on the statics, most of the artists in Songzhuang arts village are doing visual arts, and among them, contemporary artists account for the most population(Fu, 2012, p. 23). During over 30 years' development, Songzhuang arts village has become the biggest arts village in China. Its birth and development deeply influenced by the economic reform, urban transformation, and also international relationship of China. Therefore when looking into the historical change of Songzhuang arts village, it is also looking into the dynamic change happened in China's contemporary art field affected by the Chinese economics, society and international situation. Just like art critic and curator Yang Wei said that it is important to understand the rise and fall of the Yuanmingyuan painter's village, and more importantly Songzhuang, which is also half of China's contemporary art history (Yang, 2017).

However, studies about Songzhuang arts village's history show that there's still a lack of studying it in a holistic way and telling the artists' story in all classes. Some scholars have focused on the artists themselves, and investigated their operating conditions, because the big population made these artists especially important with the development of the arts village. The demographic of artists in Songzhuang and their art genre are the subjects of such studies(M. Wang, 2009; Xiong, 2018; Yang, 2008). The famous artists, or say the representative ones are mostly interviewed and studied in these studies. However, they are a tiny minority of Songzhuang artists. Most Songzhuang artists are emerging artists from grassroots background, either just starting their careers or still working hard but not yet famous. Stories from their side about Songzhuang arts village were rarely studied yet. Some scholars were interested in social forces and urban development behind the change of Songzhuang arts village. They have paid extra attention to the changing attitude of the government revealed in their policies(Qin, 2015; M. Wang, 2019; A. Y. Zhang, 2019). The other researchers were interested in the relationship between the arts village and the urbanization process in contemporary China. They have taken both globalization impact and the city development plan into consideration (Liu, Han, & O'Connor, 2013; Yu, 2006; J. Zhao, 2010). On the meanwhile some other researchers concentrated on art district

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Municipality, accessed November 26, 2019, [http://www.bjtzgh.gov.cn/tzywzd/c102589/images\\_list.shtml](http://www.bjtzgh.gov.cn/tzywzd/c102589/images_list.shtml).

2. Data accessed from official website "Creative Tongzhou", Tongzhou District People's Government of Beijing Municipality, accessed November 26, 2019, [http://www.bjtzgh.gov.cn/tzywzd/c102589/images\\_list.shtml](http://www.bjtzgh.gov.cn/tzywzd/c102589/images_list.shtml).

Songzhuang turned to be and run by the government. They have analyzed its basic characteristics, the competitive advantages and the back-up policy(JianHua Kong, 2017; Li, 2016; H. Zhao, 2013). All these existing research focuses on a specific historical stage or a specific issue in the development process of Songzhuang, with a strong sense of problem, have shed light on this paper, but in general there is a certain tendency of fragmentation, lacking a systematic compilation of the overall history of the development of the arts village and the construction of macro-level theory. As a matter of fact, the many transformations in spatial form, artistic practice and artists' community structure that Songzhuang arts village has experienced during its development reflect the profound changes in Chinese society's political, economic and cultural changes during different periods of time. Therefore, a systematically examination on the dynamic evolution of Songzhuang arts village from a holistic perspective will help deepen the understanding of the relationship between art practice and social transformation, and also provide a more explanatory theoretical framework for the study of the relationship between contemporary art and society in China.

In order to look at the dynamic evolution of Songzhuang arts village from a holistic perspective, to understanding the relationship between art practice and social transformation, Songzhuang arts village will be seen as an art *field*. The concept was proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Pierre Bourdieu defined *field* as networks structured under the relations of different agents' positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992a, p. 97). It has its own form of accumulation and distribution of capitals, then to produce different "relations and forces"(Bourdieu, 1993, p. 162,164). The particular form of capitals, historical relations and forces between positions will be inherited and internalized by the individuals within the field. Then it consists of the *habitus*. Artists in a field follow the *habitus* to acquire kinds of capitals (economic, social and cultural capital). Then these compose the social practice. It provides a theoretical boundary for the study of Songzhuang arts village. Because Songzhuang arts village is not a geographical unit with a clear spatial boundary, but rather an "imagined community" constructed on the basis of shared values, artistic practices and social identity. Therefore, when studying the historical evolution and development path of Songzhuang arts village, it is not enough to rely solely on the definition of geographic space. Bourdieu's *field* theory, which emphasizes the positional relationship, capital operation and power competition of different social practitioners in a particular historical and social structure, provides us with an effective analytical tool to understand the arts village as a loose and complex socio-cultural organization. Considering the arts village as an art field not only helps to clarify the mechanism of interaction and power structure among artists within the village, but also helps to reveal how the village is constantly changing and reconstructing itself within the larger field, China's contemporary art field, and even larger field, the Chinese society and its social, political and economic system.

According to the theory, the arts village Songzhuang can be seen as a cultural field,

built up by the complex position and capital distribution of the agents and institutions--artists, galleries, art schools and art museums etc. Then the memories about Songzhuang arts village of the artists from different classes or status can provide a way to understand Songzhuang arts village as an art field. Therefore both of the artists' memories and the field structure of Songzhuang arts village are needed to look at. By using narrative approach and in-depth interview of artists who lived in Songzhuang in different times, accompanied with archival research and field work in Songzhuang arts village, this paper then studied the dynamic change of Songzhuang arts village as an arts field and its relationship with China's contemporary art field.

### **The Development of Songzhuang Arts Village in Artists' Memory**

The artists' memories of Songzhuang arts village are inextricably linked to changes in Songzhuang over the last 30 years. Because people create their memories under the influence of society, as Halbwachs explains, "the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressures of society" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 43,51). Thus, memory can be examined in connection with various social formations. The artists' memories of Songzhuang arts village can then be used to demonstrate both the history of Songzhuang arts village and its influence on the artists' thinking and behavior. Because memory is an important aspect of one's identity and influences one's overall personality. It has the capacity to impact people's behavior and how they fit into society. People that have similar memories are more inclined to join together, and the way they govern their memories will result in a new "society immersed in thought" as Maurice Halbwachs stated in his book talking about collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992). That is one manner in which memory functions in society.

However, memory is not equal to history. An active memory is more like a present perspective of the past. It differs from official history recording. According to the research collection of cultural memory edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, it's complexes of personal ideas based on individual's experience, cultural and social semantics as well as language or other expression, even mixed with certain future expectations (Erll & Nünning, 2008, p. 218). Besides, personal memories often come from conversations and other reconstruction of the present society. As John Bodnar notes that the real essence of public memory is not the past but the present (Bodnar, 1992, p. 15). Obviously, artists in Songzhuang arts village have shared memories. Their actions are also driven by the memories and then affect the Songzhuang arts village. Therefore, looking into the memories of artists who live or used to live in Songzhuang arts village is a way to see both the past and the present of Songzhuang arts village from artists' perspective. It's helpful to prevent an elitist historical view. It can also show the changes happened in China's contemporary art field through the artists' narrative. Therefore through a narrative approach, 4 artists who live or used to live in Songzhuang arts village in different times have been interviewed. Based on their memories, accompanied with field work and archival research, Songzhuang arts village's development can be divided into 4 stages.

### **Pre-stage of Songzhuang's Development: 1978-1993**

It can be said that the birth and subsequent evolution of Songzhuang arts village is inextricably linked to the emergence and development of contemporary art in China. 1978 saw the landmark Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which ushered in a new chapter of Reform and Opening-up and transformation of the economic system. This historical transition also affected the field of culture and art, as ideological control was loosened and the art atmosphere gradually opened up, allowing unofficial experimental art exhibitions and performance art to emerge in the society(J. Wang, 1999). In late September 1979, a group of artists organized themselves into the “Stars Group” and, without official authorization, exhibited about 140 pieces of work on the outside fence of the National Art Museum of China(Gao, 2011b, p. 92). This event marks the budding phase of Chinese contemporary art.

In the 1980s, along with the introduction of Western modern philosophy and contemporary art trends, Chinese artists began to try to break away from the traditional framework of socialist realism and explore new ways of seeing and styles of artistic language. 1985 saw the culmination of the “85 New Wave”, in which some 80 independent art groups throughout the country organized academic conferences and exhibitions, and contributed to the flourishing of art journals and critical publications. As defined by critic Gao Minglu, this wave of artistic thinking has come to be known as the “85 Art Movement” or the “85 New Wave,” and is also regarded as the beginning of contemporary Chinese art(Gao, 2011a, p. 122). During this period, a tradition of artists' group life style and salon-like activity gradually took shape, and continued to influence the organization of the Chinese art world thereafter.

In 1989, the unexpected events of the China Modern Art Exhibition and the ensuing June Fourth Incident forced the public development of contemporary art in China to come to a halt. The tightening of official policies forced many independent artists to retreat to the fringes of society, avoiding the mainstream and seeking a relatively secretive and free creative space. During this period, the countryside became an ideal artistic refuge, which not only conformed to the philosophical concepts of “*BISHI*” (away from the mortal world in Taoism) in traditional Chinese culture, but also fit the artists' need to stay away from the power structure of the city and pursue spiritual freedom(Yang, 2004, p. 24). It was in this historical context that China's first art village, the Yuanmingyuan painter's village, was spontaneously formed in 1990. The village gathered a number of artists in exile and in the wilderness, exploring pure artistic language and expressing social concern as its spiritual core, becoming an important experimental ground for contemporary Chinese art practice.

In 1995, the Yuanmingyuan painter's village was officially demolished for policy reasons, and some of the artists moved to Songzhuang, which became the beginning

of a new round of arts village forms. Based an article posted on 2019 and record the past 25 years of Songzhuang arts village, in 1989, the diversification of China's labor force employment structure began to bear fruit, and the job distribution system progressively faded from historical memory. Many contemporary artists traveled north after catching a smell of Beijing's open culture and assembled in what became known as the "Yuanmingyuan painter's village" to enjoy the freedom of the creative environment. The "Cynical Realism", "Political Pop", and "Gaudy Art" that developed from this land were the mainstay of contemporary art in the 1990s. A group of current "*MANGLIU*"<sup>3</sup> painters, such as Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Yang Shaobin, and Xu Yihui, and the "Yuanmingyuan painter's village" entered the public eye in a way that had never been seen before, provoking the public's attention to their work. However, as the village expanded in size and fame, the "bohemian" grassroots culture has drawn the attention of authorities. The gathering of intellectuals and the collision of ideas appeared to have certain "dangerous" characteristics, and officials began to "send the artist-villagers back" (Wu & Han, 2019). Until 1995, Yuanmingyuan painter's village was demolished by the government. The qualities of the Yuanmingyuan painter's village in terms of artistic philosophy and community organization deeply influenced the formation and development of Songzhuang arts village, making it widely regarded as the successor of Yuanmingyuan in terms of spiritual temperament (Yang, 2012, p. 6). Like Yuanmingyuan, Songzhuang has also become an important venue for Chinese artists to engage in individual expression and group practice under the pressure of the country's economic transformation, urbanization and globalization. In fact, it is precisely because the emergence and development of Songzhuang arts village is highly consistent with the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of China's contemporary art history that Songzhuang has become an important case study for observing the evolution of China's contemporary art history. As a spontaneously formed and growing art community, Songzhuang reflects a series of complex historical processes, such as the loosening of China's ideology, the rise of the art market, the reconfiguration of urban space, and the transformation of social and cultural identities since the reform and opening-up.

### **First Stage of Songzhuang's Development: 1993-2004**

Initially, the number of artists coming to Songzhuang town was not large. According to existing research and artists' memoirs, Songzhuang arts village welcomed the first group of artists who moved there in 1993 (JianHua Kong, 2017, p. 29; Shu, 2008b, 2008a; J. Wang, 2000; Yang, 2012; Zeng, 2008). The willing of continuing the freedom of artistic life built in Yuanmingyuan painter's village drove them here. According to artist Gao Huijun's memory, 6 artists include himself, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, and Li Xianting, were the first ones found Songzhuang town as a replacement for Yuanmingyuan painter's village (Shen, 2013). They were the first batch of rich and

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3. Loose wanderer, which means aimlessly moving migrant artist, without stable occupations and permanent residences, first mentioned by artist Wen Pulin to describe the artists lived in Yuanmingyuan painter's village.

famous Chinese contemporary artists at that time. Because of their reputation in the art world at that time, more and more artists had followed their steps to move into Songzhuang. As a result, the Political and Legal Committee and the Public Security Bureau were targeting the "precious artists' resources" at the time with "no gathering, no staying in Beijing" policy towards the artists. Therefore, Songzhuang's development was slow and marginal prior to 2004 (Wu & Han, 2019). While the newly arrived artists came to Songzhuang town, they dreamed to achieve some achievement just like the Yuanmingyuan painters. As a result, they should either receive the approval and recommendation of senior artists in the power system established by successful ones, or establish a new order.

However the discourse power in Songzhuang arts village didn't followed the old pattern from Yuanmingyuan painter's village. Suo Tan,<sup>4</sup> an artist being interviewed in this research, believes that although the famous artists in Songzhuang, like Fang Lijun, who became the representatives of Chinese contemporary art both in China and overseas, but they only had houses or workshops in Songzhuang arts village, but not participated in Songzhuang's development. Artists Gao Huijun's memory confirmed Suo Tan's claim. The first six artists coming to Songzhuang town all used other people's names to buy houses, and paid each house owner RMB 1,500 for the insurance (also equivalent to a commission or introduction fee). Until the later artists started to write their own names to buy houses that the first group changed their names back around 1997 and 1998. They didn't live there often, but the rest of the time was spent in the city or abroad. In fact, the active ones were the artists of the Songzhuang *YIDAI*. They came to Songzhuang arts village at the beginning of Songzhuang arts village's establishment in the early 1994 to 1995. This wave of artists also became the ones who dominated the discourse of Songzhuang arts village at that time.

Songzhuang *YIDAI* made two efforts to form Songzhuang in the sense of a unique arts village in China. First thing was to break with Yuanmingyuan painter's village. They worked together and tried to build Songzhuang as a free and open village. They thought that unlike Yuanmingyuan painter's village, Songzhuang didn't need a so-called village chief, everyone was equal and free. Second thing Songzhuang *YIDAI* did was to build the Songzhuang style. Since year 2000, especially in 2004 and 2005, both of the artists, especially the ones from Songzhuang *YIDAI*, and the local government have made efforts to construct and promote Songzhuang arts village. Like Songzhuang Arts Festival, Songzhuang *YIDAI* did quite a lot activities and exhibitions to create the free and art-filled Songzhuang. Like Suo Tan written an "*Open Letter to Songzhuang Artists*"<sup>5</sup> in 2004, the main content was to call on everyone to organize

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4. Suo Tan, one of the artists being interviewed in this research, self-proclaimed as participants and witnesses of Chinese post-Cultural Revolution art (Chinese modern and contemporary art), is a male artist born in 1962. Since 1995, Suo Tan has been working and living in Beijing Songzhuang arts village until now. He was one of the first artists to move to Songzhuang arts village.

5. The letter was provided by the artist Suo Tan during the interview.

themselves to do something to promote Songzhuang. He also made an exhibition called "*Brilliant -- Songzhuang Ten Years Exhibition*".<sup>6</sup> In this exhibition, Suo not only invited Songzhuang artists, which as the main part, but also invited artists from other art districts in Beijing, like 798 art factory, Shangyuan arts village. The idea was to celebrate Songzhuang arts village as the earliest arts village in Beijing and a relatively neutral gathering place, for last around ten years.

Songzhuang Way (Songzhuang Arts Style) then was formed naturally during this period. In the early stage of Songzhuang arts village, Songzhuang artists on the one hand were Chinese contemporary artists, on the other hand, each artist also tried to build his own personal artistic appearance. Their works then mainly showed the following characteristics which can be called Songzhuang Way or Style. Take Suo Tan's art work as an example as in figure 1: from the whole picture, firstly, it is mainly a part of a large head portrait; and secondly, the colors may be more gorgeous; third, generally they directly describe the current life. While entered the 2000s, the Songzhuang *YIDAI* entered the age of mid-thirty. Their artistic style has also reached a mature stage. There are commonalities in style or overall taste in the artworks. It is a very clear artistic appearance with a certain stylization, interest, or symbol on it. Then people from the outside world, especially some Western or Southeast Asian art institutions can tell which artwork was from Songzhuang arts village.

**Figure 1:** Art work of Suo Tan named Wizard of the Wild

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6. The information of the exhibition was accessed on February 15, 2022, on page "*Brilliant -- Songzhuang Ten Years Exhibition*" on Web Artron, <https://exhibit.artron.net/exhibition-833.html>.





Note: the Chinese characters on the painting means “Happy Chinese New Year” written by Suo Tan when he send this to the researcher.

Since then, the independent and mature Songzhuang arts village has attracted many new generations of artists. In this stage, the artists had full of confidence in Songzhuang arts village. They hold the thought that art and arts village should be free and have independent will. The experience of independence from the Yuanmingyuan painter's village makes them more or less distrustful of the authority. At the same time, due to the closing down and reorganization of many state-owned factories and the abolition of the assigned work system, a group of independent artists emerged. They need the dream of artist success created by Songzhuang arts village as a spiritual pillar, and they also need such a lower-cost art gathering area to produce and live. As a result, Songzhuang arts village then became increasingly large.

### **Second Stage of Songzhuang's Development: 2004-2009**

The dramatic changes in Songzhuang arts village began in 2005 as Yang Wei mentioned in his memoir (Yang, 2017). This is both influenced by the social environment and driven by internal forces within Songzhuang. This is often the stage that the artist refers to as "Songzhuang of the past". This stage of Songzhuang also could be said as the most representative Songzhuang arts village if exclude it in the geographical sense.

The prosperity of Songzhuang arts village can be seen from artists' memory of the Songzhuang Art Festival. This event the artists all remembered fondly. The first Songzhuang Art Festival was held in October 2005, called Songzhuang Road.<sup>7</sup> The festival has been held for 13 sessions from 2005 to 2023, including one session every year from 2005 to 2011, and one session every two years from 2013 to 2019.<sup>8</sup> The Art Festival suspended for two years because of the COVID-19 epidemic until the twelfth session was held in 2022 and the thirteenth in October 2023. From 2005 to 2011, it was also the stage of Songzhuang's relatively stable development and gradually expanding influence. According to the memories of the artists, the first Songzhuang Art Festival in 2005 was the beginning of Songzhuang's glory. This event brought Songzhuang's artists and their works to the public eye, attracting significant attention from 64 international and domestic media outlets, including BBC and Asahi Shimbun. The festival received over 13,000 pieces of international information related to its events. The local art market thrived and reached its peak during this time (Wu & Han, 2019). During the first Songzhuang Art Festival, Xu Song Road, the main street in Songzhuang arts village has turned into an open-air gallery. The paintings hung on both sides of the road about a hundred meters. Artist Xing Ming<sup>9</sup> recalled that the paintings on both sides of the road were not chaotic; on the contrary, they were organized. The festival maintained its independence and non-mainstream nature. Many people came here for the festival. It was already a trend at that time.

The officials of Songzhuang town government also contributed to the organization and continuation of the initial Songzhuang Art Festival. In Xing Ming's memory, the success of the first Songzhuang Art Festival cannot be achieved without the Former Party Secretary of Songzhuang Town, Hu Jiebao. As Xing Ming said, when he came to Songzhuang, he took the initiative to communicate with the artists and work together to push the entire Songzhuang to internationalization. According to verifiable evidence on web Artron,<sup>10</sup> the first Songzhuang Arts Festival is known as "The Third China North-South Folk Song Competition and the First China Songzhuang Culture and Arts Festival". The Office of the Leading Group of China Ethnic Folk Culture Protection Project and the Ministry of Culture's Ethnic Folk Literature and Art Development Center hosted the event from October 21-26, 2005, and it was organized by the Songzhuang Township Government of Tongzhou District and the Songzhuang Art Promotion Association. Artist Suo Tan's recollection has corroborated Xing Ming's view. In his recollection, when the new secretary Hu Jiebao came to Songzhuang Town, he also brought some helpers. He transferred a deputy mayor, Hong Feng, from another town in Tongzhou District as his assistant. Later, Hong

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7. Information about "The 1st Songzhuang Art Festival" can be seen on Web Artron, updated September 17, 2009, <https://huanan.artron.net/20090917/n87378.html>.

8. "China Songzhuang Culture and Art Festival Documentary Retrospective Exhibition", Douban.com, accessed July 20th, 2022, <https://www.douban.com/event/32856650>.

9. Artist being interviewed in this research, he is sculptor and oil painter, who used to live in Songzhuang arts village from 2002 to 2019.

10. "The 1st Songzhuang Art Festival" 2009.

became the chairman of Songzhuang Art Promotion Association. He has done a lot of work on the early "Culture Builds Town" plan. After he came to Songzhuang, he proposed to build a cultural town, and held the first art festival and the first art exhibition -- *The Songzhuang Road*. In 2006, Songzhuang arts village became one of the first 11 cultural and creative industry (CCI) clusters.<sup>11</sup> Then from 2008 to 2012, Songzhuang has been built around the idea of "culture builds town, build a cultural heritage a hundred years later". Since the government intervened in 2005, Songzhuang arts village has gained influence.

Artist Yao Yu<sup>12</sup> was attracted by the free atmosphere for artistic creation of Songzhuang arts village. He stayed there for a month or two, and then officially moved from Guangzhou to Beijing stayed in Songzhuang arts village since 2009. The first year he moved to Songzhuang, he was blown away by the scale and atmosphere of the Songzhuang Art Festival. It was something he had never seen in Guangzhou. The festival lasted about half a month. According to his recollection, during the festival, the roads and streets were full of sculptures, various installations, and some performance arts; every art gallery was open to public, even if some were charged. He constantly emphasized the atmosphere of Songzhuang Art Festival was quit free and creative.

In addition to the freedom of artistic creation and activity, the Songzhuang Arts Village's gradually increasing popularity and influence during the development phase around 2005 was also inseparable from the prosperity of the art market at that time. The art market for Chinese contemporary art was quite friendly at that time around 2005 to 2012. Artist Wu Dewu<sup>13</sup> said that during the first Songzhuang Art Festival every kinds of painting can be sold. Zhao Li, in his 2006-2007 China Art Market Research Report, also mentions that the average auction price of Chinese Contemporary art doubled between 2002 and 2007. The number of Chinese artists on Sotheby's "Rich Young Artists" list rose from one in 2002 to 34 in 2008 (ZHAO, 2007). At that time, China's economy developed relatively fast, and it was easy to make money in all walks of life. When people made money easily, they were willing to take part of the money for a small amount of investment. At that time, the contemporary art market in China benefited better than the traditional painting's market. The artists who engaged in contemporary art were quite respected.

Although the economic crisis happened in 2008 spread to China, but it has soft landed in China, because there are four trillion bailouts.<sup>14</sup> 2008 was the Olympic Games; Beijing attracted the attention of the world. Songzhuang became a political symbol to

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11. "Beijing Songzhuang Cultural and Creative Industries Cluster," Tongzhou District People's Government of Beijing Municipality, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.bjtz.gov.cn/bjtz/fzx/202007/1308583.shtml>.

12. Yao Yu is another artist that being interviewed in this research, he is a young indie filmmaker, the first time he went to Songzhuang arts village was 2005, and move out in the end of 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic.

13. A contemporary oil painter who moved into Songzhuang since 1999, also being interviewed in this research.

14. "4 Wanyi Jihua [4 trillion plan]" BaiduBaik, accessed Nov. 18th, 2023, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%9B%9B%E4%B8%87%E4%BA%BF%E8%AE%A1%E5%88%92/8497463>.

show the modernity, inclusiveness and artistry of Beijing. It was better for all the artists to sell paintings. Besides, lower average rents in the art village was also a factor that attracted more and more artists flocked to Songzhuang arts village during this period. So until 2012 to 2014, everyone's living conditions were relatively good in Songzhuang. The overall Songzhuang was going up, including the income of artists selling paintings.

### **Third Stage of Songzhuang's Development: 2009-2019**

Due to international economic situation, art market in China has met with a decline. The "2009 Art Market Confidence Survey Report" made by Artprice shows that over the year 2007-2008, the art price index rose by 29%. However, at the end of 2008, the art price index fell by 30.7% from January 2008 to January 2009, as the global financial system was heading towards the edge of break down. With this, the Art Market Confidence Index, published in January 2009, fell to a historic low of minus 20 %, and in the first quarter of 2009, the art price index fell by a further 10%. However, Confidence in traditional Chinese art categories remains high.<sup>15</sup> According to "2016 Annual Art Market Report", the total annual auction turnover of Chinese paintings and calligraphy has increased every year from 2009 to 2016. Contemporary art, on the other hand, almost bottomed out in 2009, and then grew slowly.<sup>16</sup> As a result, traditional Chinese painters gradually integrated and became the main body of the art market at that time. The power of discourse in Songzhuang arts village has been transferred from contemporary artists to traditional ink painters. It's because that the market for Chinese contemporary art is mainly overseas. The change in art market in China immediately influenced Songzhuang arts village. According to the "2019 China Cultural Relics and Art Auction Market Annual Report" released by the China Association of Auctioneers (CAA) at the "Shanghai Dialogue" summit forum, the performance of the art market in 2019 was not satisfactory due to the uncertainty brought about by the Sino-US trade friction and the slowdown of China's economic growth (Qiong & Xiang, 2021). In other words, after the 2008 economic crisis, the impact of the Western economic downturn began to show. Plus the U.S. - China trade war, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the market for Chinese contemporary art has experienced a down turn. The society cannot afford so many artists, and the items they create are oversupplied. Also, the artists cannot afford to live as artists in Songzhuang. Some of them had to leave the old village -- Xiaopu (which was once the most concentrated area for artists), migrate to the depths of the villages, or travel further away from Beijing, such as to Hebei. Suo Tan recalls that around 2014, traditional ink artists who were more popular in the local art market moved in. There are no contemporary painters' studios along Songzhuang's main roadways, and

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15. Artprice, "2009 Art Market Confidence Survey Report," ArtChina, accessed May 16, 2023, [http://art.china.cn/zixun/2010-08/22/content\\_3672600\\_2.html](http://art.china.cn/zixun/2010-08/22/content_3672600_2.html).

16. Artron, "2016 Annual Art Market Report," Artprice, accessed May 16, 2023 <https://zh.artprice.com/artprice-reports/zh-the-art-market-in-2016/characteristics-of-the-chinese-art-market-in-2016-zh?from=search>.

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replaced by certain Chinese painting academy and art training institutions.

From 2013, politically speaking, China has changed to a new leader, and China has made new strategy for development, ideology was also a little tighter than before. As a result, the artist's actions, artworks and exhibitions were restricted and not as free as before. Some exhibitions may be subject to official approval, and certain conditions were set. For example, the nude human body or performance art cannot be shown in an exhibition. At the same time, many government institutions arrived, including the National Academy of Painting, and the atmosphere in Songzhuang arts village had gradually changed.

The atmosphere change in Songzhuang arts village can be seen through another art festival called Beijing Independent Film Festival. It is another well-known ongoing art festival. The changes it faces also corroborate the ideological challenges Songzhuang faces. Founded in 2006 as Beijing Independent Film Forum, it has been officially renamed as Beijing Independent Film Festival since 2009.<sup>17</sup> It is organized by Li Xianting Film Foundation and founded by Mr. Li Xianting, who was known as godfather of Songzhuang. However, in 2011, 2012 and the years that followed, independent film festivals faced increasing pressure. Based on Yao Yu's memory, in around 2014, a siege and suppression activity was carried out on the Beijing Independent Film Festival in Songzhuang. There were villagers surrounded the screening room, prevented the film festival to happen, and then blocked the screening room and the road. Finally the people from the Songzhuang Cultural Bureau went to remove all the materials of the film festival. In 2018, because there was no way to open the call for films, very few films were received and screenings and exchanges could not be done properly. In the end, the awards were judged, several awards were still vacant, and the Beijing Independent Film Festival was almost over since then.<sup>18</sup>

Another big influence came from the city planning -- building the sub-center of Beijing and the relocation of Beijing Municipal Government to Tongzhou District. Coupled with the shift of the local town government's official, many original plans for Songzhuang Art District were overturned. The government's planning did lead to a decrease in the number of artists in Songzhuang arts village. Back in 2012, Beijing officially proposed to make Tongzhou District a sub-center of the city for the first time. Subsequently, in the work reports of the Beijing Municipal Government in 2013 and 2014, it was clearly requested to speed up the construction of Tongzhou as the sub-center of the city (L. Ma, 2014). The construction plan of the city's sub-center means that a large number of houses in the village may be demolished and relocated, and the huge amount of compensation for demolition and relocation has triggered a new round of "property disputes" between the artists and the local villagers.

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17. The data of Beijing Independent Festival was concluded by the researcher based on Archives Website of Contemporary Art.

18. "The Disappearing Chinese Independent Film Festival", Web Sohu, accessed July 10, 2022, [https://www.sohu.com/a/377245707\\_120181387](https://www.sohu.com/a/377245707_120181387)

Therefore, leaving Songzhuang is the most common discussion among artists when they get together during this period (C. Zhang, 2018). In 2019, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council passed the "Controlling Detailed Planning of Beijing Sub-center (Block Level) (2016-2035)".<sup>19</sup> Recently, the draft of "Land Space Planning and Regulatory Detailed Planning (Block Level) (2020-2035) of Songzhuang Town, Tongzhou District" was announced.<sup>20</sup> From this draft, it is not difficult to see that the future of Songzhuang arts village: Songzhuang will not be demolished, but will be relocated.

The new planning proposed to build two districts in Songzhuang town. One is the central area of Songzhuang Town, and the other is the Xiaopu Art District. It divided Songzhuang town into 4 groups. Among the groups, Xiaopu village is called Xiaopu Group, which is also the Xiaopu Art District. While the entire old village to be cut off, the factory area will be demolished, as well as the art galleries and artist studios built after the Songzhuang Cultural Industry District. Even this relocation emphasizes more on the rebuilding Songzhuang arts village with better plan, the artists in Songzhuang are still concern about the relocation of Songzhuang arts village. The artists' concerns come from historical reason. Through the interview and the observation in Songzhuang arts village, the artists valuing most about Songzhuang arts village is the free atmosphere. The free atmosphere in Songzhuang arts village lies not only in their life style, but also their artistic practices. Above all, the free atmosphere comes from the origin of Songzhuang arts village, which is formed by the artists themselves. They can influence the development of Songzhuang arts village. Therefore, when the government stepped in, even maybe the new city plan and the relocation can save Songzhuang arts village from the rising price of real estate and the loss of the artists, the artists are still be skeptical about the future of Songzhuang arts village.

The Songzhuang Way based on the Songzhuang *YIDAI* was also challenged at this period. With the demolition of many artist gathering areas in Beijing, Songzhuang has instead become a relatively stable arts village. Artists used to live in other arts villages or districts, like ones lived around 798 arts district, started to move to Songzhuang arts village after 2008. Since they moved in, new social group were formed. What's more, in order to be known in the art world, these artists also made their effort to break the old power structure. Songzhuang *YIDAI* was no longer the one that own the discourse power in Songzhuang. Songzhuang Way then entered a new stage. In this new stage, the Songzhuang art festival became part of the Songzhuang tourism signboard. Its meaning changed from an artistic exhibition to a market place of tourists. As a matter of fact, Songzhuang arts village is already a brand for Tongzhou

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19. "The central government approves the detailed planning of Beijing's urban sub-center "Tongzhou District People's Government of Beijing Municipality(Website), posted January 3,2019, [www.bjtz.gov.cn/bjtz/home/201901/1200090.shtml](http://www.bjtz.gov.cn/bjtz/home/201901/1200090.shtml).

20. "Draft of Land Spatial Planning and Regulatory Detailed Planning (Block Level) (2020-2035) of Songzhuang Town, Tongzhou District", Tongzhou District People's Government of Beijing Municipality(Website), posted December 31,2021, [www.bjtz.gov.cn/bjtz/home/202112/1506136.shtml](http://www.bjtz.gov.cn/bjtz/home/202112/1506136.shtml).

District or even Beijing and Chinese contemporary art. What's more, as the capital city of China, Beijing needs a place like Songzhuang arts village to show the world about free and open artistry and contemporary of China. Therefore, the existence of the arts village is inevitable.

#### **Fourth Stage of Songzhuang's Development: 2019-Now**

At this stage, Songzhuang artists have given Songzhuang arts village a new name. They call Songzhuang arts village as "Send Away Village". Because the word "Send Away" pronounced the same as "SONG" in Chinese. Under the influence of multiple factors such as the COVID-19 epidemic, the complex relationship between China and the West, and the planning and redevelopment of the Tongzhou District Government, quit a lot artists chose to move away. In November 2022, China had completely stopped the strict policy for COVID-19. Mandatory mask-wearing, temperature checks, and quarantine for international travelers were stopped gradually. China is slowly recovering from the impact of the pandemic. However, three years strict policy for COVID-19 has had a profound impact on Chinese society and its economy. Many businesses have closed, and there has been a sharp rise in unemployment. Moreover, the pandemic has had a ripple effect on global trade, causing a slowdown in the Chinese economy.

The wave pandemic created also affected the art market in China. In response to the need to prevent and control the epidemic, a large number of public art events were cancelled in 2020, both domestically and internationally, and after 2020, public events were restricted due to the recurrence of the epidemic. According to the "Artron Index Report - China's Art Market under the Epidemic", from the perspective of the overall market size, from January to August, the art auction market in China has shrunk significantly, with a turnover of 10.589 billion RMB, a year-on-year decrease of 60.80%. In 2021, the Guangzhou Art Fair only had 100 participating galleries, with a visitor flow of 20,000, and the scale was greatly reduced; the scale of Hong Kong Art Basel also had greatly reduced in 2021, from 242 galleries in 2019 to 104 galleries; from 2015 to 2019, the Beijing Art Fair had a venue size of 15,000 square meters, but in 2021 after the epidemic, the venue size had be reduced to 10,000 square meters; in 2021, the Shanghai Art Fair didn't be held (Yunzhi, 2022). According to "2022 Art Market Report", China's art market drops 34% from \$5.9 billion to \$3.9 billion in 2022.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from the International public art events, artists' activities in Songzhuang arts village also face restrict during the pandemic. For example, in the summer of 2020, when the pandemic had been contained in China, the state media issued a press release urging the "stall economy" and "night market economy" to raise domestic demand and foster economic recovery. Songzhuang artists also started a self-help

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21. Data was from "2022 Art Market Report," *Artprice.com*, accessed July 23, 2023.



campaign, with stalls set up in front of the Songzhuang Art Center as figure 2 showed. As evidenced by the documentary *Heidao* (means mob) Records released to YouTube, the artists' true goal was not to sell their paintings at stalls, but rather to revive the traditional Songzhuang lifestyle. Artists can be seen playing and singing by the side of the road, as well as selling their paintings and mingling with passersby.<sup>22</sup> However, after 11 days of putting up their stalls, the Songzhuang artists were pushed back by city authorities, who claimed that "the city did not have the documents to allow them to set up their stalls" (Chinaliveart, 2020).

**Figure 2:** Photo of artists set up stalls in front of Songzhuang Art Center in 2020



Note: accessed from Artspy.cn.

Relocation, rebuilding, the pandemic and the economic downturn, against such a background, no wonder artists are skeptical about the development and continuation of Songzhuang arts village. In 2022, Songzhuang arts village had only about 8,500 art institution practitioners and artists left.<sup>23</sup> In 2023, Songzhuang arts village did not usher in the spring of full opening after the infection of Covid-19 in China. Based on the observation in Songzhuang arts village, only restaurants, cafes and painting schools are open on the street during weekly hours. Walk along the main road, Xu Song Road as showed in figure 3, instead of its former glory, there are large vacant

22. Data was from a video on Youtube called "Songzhuang doesn't have an art festival this year, but last year there was an exhibition that was banned before it opened - Songzhuang Memory; Because the exhibition was not positive enough." Heidao Records, upload on October 3rd, 2020.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oJyTmW7HI0>

23. Data accessed from "The Commercialization of Songzhuang Art District", accessed April 11, 2023, Wechat Official Video Accounts Yizhan Art ONE.



lots and commercial complexes to be built. Even the large landmark buildings, like Songzhuang Art Center or Sunshine International Art Museum, have few visitors. After the Covid-19 Pandemic, Songzhuang seems to have recovered relatively slowly. This may be due to the fact that Songzhuang arts village already experienced fluctuations in the art market, property disputes between artists and villagers, and the government's reorganization of Songzhuang's land layout and tightening of control over art creation long before the epidemic began. Xing Ming expressed dissatisfaction with Songzhuang art village from a spontaneously formed by artists to an art district controlled by the government, he said that "In the end, it's not fun to make it look like it's *TIZHINEI* (inside the system) and freelance artists won't want to stay there anymore." In the past, Songzhuang was a place where artists could start from scratch. But now, artists need to be rich or achieved something to live in Songzhuang arts village. Yao Yu, the young artist already left Songzhuang arts village for the above reason. During the interview, both Suo Tan and Wu Dewu mentioned that more and more artists like Yao Yu are leaving. Regarding the future of Songzhuang arts viilage, Wu Dewu even said, "It feels like it's over."

**Figure 3:** Xu Song Road



Note: the main street in Xiaopu village, shot in May 2023

## **Different attitudes towards old and new Songzhuang arts village**

Through the artists' recollections, it can be seen that their attitudes towards the different stages of Songzhuang arts village's development differed markedly. The artists separate Songzhuang arts village as the old Songzhuang and the New Songzhuang arts village. For the old Songzhuang arts village, the artists showed nostalgia for it. For the new Songzhuang arts village, the artists, especially ones moved to Songzhuang at the early times, hold a negative attitude. Based on the narrative of the artists and archival research, the old Songzhuang which the artists prefer can be related to the first and second stage of Songzhuang arts village's development. For the new Songzhuang arts village, which the artists said that is not the real Songzhuang anymore, can be related to the third and fourth stage of Songzhuang arts village's development. The research here argues that the different attitude of the artists towards Songzhuang arts village's development is because the field structure of Songzhuang arts village has changed. In order to understand this change in Songzhuang arts village field, three steps will be followed as Bourdieu suggested. It cannot be separated with analysis of the "power of field" first and then the "structure of relations between positions", and the bigger field power where the field is positioned in (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992b, pp. 104–105). Then the relation and position of Songzhuang agents should be taken into consideration; and the historical background of Chinese contemporary art world, the economic condition, political atmosphere and international situation should be also taken into consideration as the bigger field power where the field is positioned in.

In Pre-stage of Songzhuang arts village's development, Chinese contemporary art emerged silently as a new cultural phenomenon, gradually revealing its distinct trajectory of growth. This period coincided with the early stages of China's Reform and Opening-up, and the state began to prioritize the development of science and technology, education, and culture, resulting in profound changes in the social structure. The restoration of *GAOKAO* (the national college entrance exam in China) was an important symbol of this historical transition, allowing a large number of young artists to receive formal higher art education and systematically learn professional art theories, creative techniques, and technical means, laying the groundwork for the future rise of contemporary art in China. At the same time, western avant-garde art trends, graphic materials, and theoretical translations began to make their way into China's colleges and universities, art museums, and folk art circles, igniting a strong ideological impact and a desire for exploration among artists who had been constrained by the Cultural Revolution. As a result, salon-like study, discussion, and exchange became the artists' group's most important activities at the time, and they organized book clubs, observation activities, and technique seminars in unofficial and semi-private spaces, attempting to interpret Western contemporary art works, considering the relationship between modern art language and Chinese reality, and experimenting with newer expressive methods and artistic propositions. On this

foundation, the artists' works have also undergone qualitative transformations. They no longer adhere to conventional Chinese painting techniques and aesthetics, preferring to incorporate personal life experiences, societal critique, and philosophical thought into their paintings. The diversity of artistic language has grown dramatically, and modes of expression include oil paintings, installations, sculptures, music, and behavioral art. China's first spontaneously formed arts village, the Yuanmingyuan painter's village, was born in the midst of this shift in thinking and creating. It brought together a large number of young artists eager to break free from institutional constraints and pursue artistic freedom, and it became an important base for contemporary art experimentation and exchange in China, laying the spiritual and organizational groundwork for the establishment of Songzhuang arts village. In the early 1990s, China's social and economic structures witnessed significant transformations. A substantial number of state-owned firms went bankrupt and were restructured, resulting in the layoff of many workers and the dissolution of the original workers. At the same time, the job distribution system for university graduates was gradually phased away, and graduates of art colleges could no longer rely on the "job you can't lose" posts allocated by the state, resulting in a huge number of independent artists to pursue their own career. They rushed to major cities, particularly Beijing, where politics, the economics, and culture are tightly concentrated. This migration is not only motivated by survival, but also by their artistic ideal: the 85 New Wave of art's independent spirit and the concept of free creativity deeply influenced this group of artists, making them more inclined to adopt a "Salon-like phenomenon" of life and work, collective renting, observing each other, discussing the language and concepts of art, and exchanging exhibition and market information. This community-based way of survival and communication has resulted in the establishment of various arts villages in major cities such as Beijing, with Songzhuang arts village being one of the most prominent and typical examples.

The First stage of Songzhuang arts village development can be referred to as its "natural growth" period (1993-2006). At this point, Songzhuang lacked explicit governmental planning or cultural industry participation, and the expansion of the village space was mostly dependent on spontaneous migration and the formation of artist groups. Initially, as the "Post-89" generation of Chinese modern artists scattered from the Yuanmingyuan painters' village, some of them began to seek new creative and residential spaces in Beijing's outskirts. Songzhuang, with its comparatively low land prices, roomy circumstances, and reasonable distance from Beijing's metropolitan core, emerged as an excellent landing destination. According to data, 682 artists settled or established studios in Songzhuang between 1993 and 2006(Jianhua Kong, 2008, p. 21), and Songzhuang arts village grew from an ordinary rural village to the largest and most prominent modern art community in northern China. Compared to the Yuanmingyuan painter's village, the living conditions for artists in Songzhuang have improved. Artists no longer have to hide in dread of raids, inspections, or forced demolitions by city authorities and police; locals have gradually reconciled to the presence of artists, and the "legitimacy" of the art village has been

recognized at the civic level. It is worth emphasizing, however, that despite Songzhuang's greater geographical autonomy, artists, who were not Beijingers, still remain limited by Beijing's household registration system and social control rules. When non-Beijing artists face difficulties such as police inspections and household registration checks, they remain at risk of being identified as "temporary residents" or "jobless vagrants" and deported. Songzhuang arts village retains a "grey zone" quality throughout this period due to its "marginalization" status; it is an extension of the official cultural system and a blind spot in the city administration's vision. This "natural growth" era was the most pure and closest to the concept of free art in Songzhuang arts village. The way artists gathered, lived, and explored art remained spontaneous and non-institutionalized, and there was no unified planning, clear management organization, or systematic business operation model within the village, so the atmosphere of art creation was thick and experimental. This phase created the groundwork for Songzhuang's eventual institutionalization and industrialization, as well as providing a valuable example for scholars studying the relationship between contemporary art and spatial production in China.

While during the Second stage of Songzhuang arts village's development, it finally finds a way to cooperate with the local government. The interaction between artists, local governments, and indigenous villages has also changed dramatically, and the link between art production and local economic and social growth has grown stronger. On the one hand, many independent artists from the former Yuanmingyuan painter's village and other Beijing artists who have lost their sites of creativity owing to urban destruction and space constraints have relocated to Songzhuang. They want a somewhat stable and safe working and living environment that is no longer subject to heavy-handed government intrusion. Throughout this process, the artists' community has come to appreciate the necessity of preserving positive relationships with local villages and the government. Some artists have taken the initiative to spread knowledge of contemporary art among Songzhuang aborigines in an effort to dispel the stereotype of "artists as aliens" and integrate into village life. This type of "cultural identity building" not only reduces villagers' distrust and misunderstanding of artists, but it also builds the groundwork for the arts village's eventual social integration. On the other side, with the influx of artists, Songzhuang's economic structure has gradually shifted. Songzhuang residents, who were previously primarily engaged in agriculture and small individual industries, began to shift their focus to providing various services to artists, such as opening restaurants, operating painting material stores, selling painting and calligraphy supplies, and renting or selling residential properties, among other things. The artists' local consumption power directly influenced the local community's increasing activity. At the same time, Songzhuang arts village has gained extensive societal attention as a "marginal space" due to increased media exposure and visits from various domestic and foreign buyers. Songzhuang's development was also influenced by national development strategies. Following China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the central government and the

Beijing Municipal Government began to place a high value on strengthening the country's cultural soft power and shaping its image as an international metropolis. The local government identified Songzhuang as one of the windows to represent Chinese culture's inclusivity, openness, and modernity, and it was included in the official urban development plan. At this point, contemporary art in China underwent similar changes: on the one hand, it attempted to popularize and educate contemporary art for the general public, as well as to dispel social misconceptions about contemporary art as "deviant" and "difficult to understand"; on the other hand, thanks to the global economic boom and the rise of China's affluent class, Chinese contemporary art works have consistently fetched high prices in the international art market, making them hotspots for capital investment and cultural consumption, while artists' market status and economic income have increased significantly.

However, the "golden period of development" did not last. Excessive commercialization and an infusion of real estate finance began to erode Songzhuang's art ecology in the third stage of its development. The number of artists continued to grow, and the local government's attention, combined with the involvement of external capital, resulted in a dramatic increase in the price of land and property in Songzhuang. Indigenous communities felt unsatisfied with the low-cost sales and leasing contracts they had signed in the beginning, and they began to seek restitution of their power to distribute benefits through legal or administrative intervention. Because of the unique nature of land ownership in rural China, where residential land is collectively owned, individual sales and purchases are not fully recognized by law, resulting in many disputes between artists and farmers over land and property rights. Some of the artists who first settled in Songzhuang got disillusioned and opted to leave or return to the city. At the same time, the significant engagement of real estate developers has improved some of the living and exhibiting facilities while also resulting in a high level of commercialization of the space. A large number of galleries, art training institutions, boutique cafes, and other new businesses arrived in the village, and the main road of Xiaopu Village, which was originally full of experimentation and free spirit, was transformed into a commercial street, making it difficult to maintain the original art village lifestyle and forcing artists to relocate to unknown villages on the outskirts, or even leave Songzhuang entirely and start a new business. The global financial crisis began in 2008, and demand for contemporary art in China fell precipitously. On the contrary, traditional ink and calligraphy were popular among Chinese domestic investors. In the face of a market downturn and the pressure to survive, some Songzhuang contemporary artists were forced to change the style and subject matter of their works in order to cater to the market, and the structure of Songzhuang's artist groups, as well as their creative outlooks, have quietly changed. This process, in some ways, represents the experience of Chinese contemporary art itself: the challenging search for and adjustment between globalization and localization, market and ideal.

As Songzhuang entered its fourth stage of growth, the emergence of the Covid-19

epidemic had a significant impact on the city's art ecology and the wider atmosphere of Chinese contemporary art. On the one hand, the Chinese government implemented a closed-door management system to prevent and control the epidemic, and offline art activities nearly came to a halt, resulting in the loss of traditional exhibition and sales channels for artists, a significant drop in economic income, and a setback in creative confidence. On the other hand, digitization and networking are fast expanding, resulting in new art forms such as online exhibitions, virtual galleries, NFT artworks, and virtual image works. Artists gradually adapted to online social networking, virtual transactions, cloud cooperation, and so forth. Geographic location became less important, and Songzhuang's original "salon-like phenomenon" offline sociability method and workshop communication mode were gradually supplanted, reducing artists' connectivity inside the village and qualitatively affecting the community mood. At this point, Chinese contemporary art is also undergoing profound transformations: the trend of globalization and technologization has become more visible, with the emergence of a large number of virtual art, digital images, and cross-media experimental works, weakening the spatial function of the "arts village" in the traditional sense. Songzhuang arts village faces a new problem of positioning and transformation: will it continue to exist as a real art village, or will it transition to a cultural IP? The solution to this question has implications for the future of contemporary art in China.

### **Conclusion: dynamic change of Songzhuang arts village reflects the development of contemporary art in China**

The emergence of Songzhuang arts village is closely related to the occurrence of contemporary art in China. In the early stages of its development, Songzhuang arts village was able to have an impact on the Chinese contemporary art field. Because at that time, there were artists in Songzhuang arts village who can represent Chinese contemporary art internationally. They produced representative styles of Chinese contemporary art, including Political Pop, Gaudy Art, and Cynical Realism. The other artists in Songzhuang then tried to follow their steps to achieve artistic success. This leads to that at the early stage of Songzhuang arts village, contemporary artists made up the majority of total artists. They even have chains of contempt (Y. Ma, 2008). Contemporary artists are the most respected. Contemporary artworks have also been fetching sky-high prices in the art market.

During the late stage, or say the third and the fourth stage of Songzhuang arts village's development, with the onset of the global economic crisis and the deterioration of US-China relations, the development of Chinese contemporary art, with the international market as its main market, has not been very good. Contemporary artists in Songzhuang arts village found more difficult to sell their art works. No new world-renowned Chinese contemporary artists have emerged, nor have new representative styles of Chinese contemporary artistic style or artworks emerged. The proportion of contemporary artists in Songzhuang is changing. They no longer make

up the largest percentage of Songzhuang's art villages. Songzhuang arts village is in transition, shifting from a forefront of contemporary art in China to a cultural tourist destination in Beijing. And this change in Songzhuang arts village can also be seen in the decline of Chinese contemporary art. What's more, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic has met with a downturn both in China and abroad. Many art events were called off during the epidemic. Many artists have struggled to cope with the changes in Songzhuang, particularly the rising rents and lack of opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the village's commercialization, has resulted in fewer possibilities for artists to display their work and interact with other artists in the community, affecting both their artistic expression and their personal life. The situation in Songzhuang arts village raises significant concerns regarding the relationship between art and commerce, the role of government in the development of artistic communities, and the impact of external variables like as pandemics and economic downturns on the arts. The artists in Songzhuang have adapted to the changing environment in different ways. Some artists have switched their concentration to create tourist-friendly art, while others have decided to leave the town entirely in search of fresh chances elsewhere. Some artists have also adjusted their artistic style or medium to meet the increased demand for classic ink paintings. Some artists tried new means of expressing themselves while remaining committed to their artistic vision. Furthermore, some artists have turned to online platforms to showcase their work and connect with other artists. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on public gatherings, online platforms have become an essential tool for artists to exhibit their work and engage with other artists in the community. At this point, Chinese contemporary art is also undergoing profound transformations: the trend of globalization and technologization has become more visible, with the emergence of a large number of virtual art, digital images, and cross-media experimental works, weakening the spatial function of the "arts village" in the traditional sense. Songzhuang arts village faces a new problem of positioning and transformation: will it continue to exist as a real art village, or will it transition to a cultural IP? The solution to this question has implications for the future of contemporary art in China.

Overall, the developments in Songzhuang mirror broader tendencies in China's art scene, with gentrification and commercialization supplanting the spontaneity of the original artistic communities. The artists' perspectives about Songzhuang represent the issues that contemporary Chinese artists face as they navigate a rapidly shifting economic and political context. It is also worth emphasizing that the issues confronting Songzhuang Arts Village are not unique to the village, but rather part of a larger trend in China's art scene. Many art villages throughout China, including Tianzifang in Shanghai and 798 in Beijing, have suffered similar issues, with commercialization and gentrification supplanting the spontaneity of the original artistic communities.

Finally, the evolution of Songzhuang arts village demonstrates the complexities and

challenges of maintaining an artistic community in an ever-changing economic and political setting. The village's future remains uncertain, but it is obvious that the issues facing Songzhuang arts village are part of a bigger trend in China's art world, and addressing these challenges will require a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between art, commerce, and government policy.

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