At World Expo 2010 Shanghai, a village named Dafen was chosen as Shenzhen’s exhibition theme in the Urban Best Cities Practice Area. This village on the outskirts of Shenzhen SEZ used to be known for its replication industry of masterpieces and popular oil paintings. Consequently, it experienced predictable arguments after being selected. Meanwhile, due to the village layout as a series of concentrated significant samples closely related to China’s urbanization and social transformation process, its appearance will be distinguished from the official aesthetics and positive narration of the Expo, presenting a unique kind of atmosphere combining both the real and surreal. In the sample of Dafen, its amazing alignment of western-type aesthetics with China’s labor-intensive industry helps us find almost all the keywords emerging during the great transformation from farming China into an urban one: Special Economic Zone, land reform, industrialization in rural areas, rural migrant worker, Made-in-China, village-in-city, creative and cultural industry and urbanization. Selecting Dafen to participate in the Expo symbolizes that China’s informal economy, developed in the past three decades, is gradually getting more and more attention and is normalized under official planning and policy support. The selection also raises the proposition of how to adapt to local conditions and nurture our own typical “Created-in-China” on the grassroots foundation of “Made-in-China”. Therefore, Dafen is significant not only for its contribution to documenting China’s 30-year long industrialization and urbanization process, but also because the modernization model represented by Dafen becomes a revelatory sustainable model for the latecomers while maintaining the importance of being a sample. The book A Village by the SEZ is more than an analysis on Dafen sample’s status quo; it can be regarded as one of the samples of Dafen’s diverse cultural industry, which raises new propositions for the future development of China’s urbanization.
At Dafen Village, painters taking their afternoon nap in the 12th corridor on the 3rd floor.
Overlooked by the determined eyes of Van Gogh portraits.
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SEZ, 2nd Frontier, Informal Economy

One of the success factors of the Dafen model is its geographical location. Shenzhen used to be a “besieged city” located between the 1st and 2nd frontier. Customs and checkpoints on both frontiers were passageways connecting the SEZ, hinterland China and Hong Kong, around which a series of open or secret “economic zones” involved with border trade gradually emerged. Dafen sits at the broadest mouth of the mountains along the line of 2nd frontier (so it becomes the most urbanized region outside the border later). Directly leading to Hong Kong through the Buiji checkpoint and LuoHu custom. Thanks to its position, Dafen benefits from Hong Kong just like Shenzhen, and became both the investment target of foreign capital and the backyard of global markets. Since locating outside of SEZ, it has been able to import labor resources from hinterland China very conveniently. Dafen Village situates at the interface location between the external capital and internal labor force, which gives it the conditions to establish “informal special zone” from the bottom-up; it also forms conditions to develop export-oriented economies like other industrial villages along China’s southeastern coastline. Based on the geographic location and economy orientation, the factors of production spontaneously regroup themselves “according to current scenario” and form their own industrial choice. Underlying the particularity of Dafen’s oil painting industry, it is de facto a series of universalities caused by the interaction of geographic and policy factors. The development of China’s dislocation competition pattern of “one brand in one village” is driven by the market and guided by the government, so Dafen is nothing more than a simple representative on the map of rural China’s industries, which is composed of various specialized industrial villages.

Land Reform, Cheap Labor, Labor-Intensive Industry

Another success factor of the Dafen model is the large amount of cheap labor transferred from the hinterland. China initiated Land Reform in rural areas almost at the same time of SEZ’s establishment. The seemingly unlimited supply of surplus rural labor liberated from new rural policies, combined with the cheap land and foreign investment, formed the dynamic model of China’s industrialization and urbanization in the first three decades of Reform and Opening-up. The industrialization and urbanization occurring in villages and towns were launched by Land Reform in 80’s and lasted for 10 years; after that, the agriculture production, marginalized by the long-lasting price scissors between industrial products and agricultural produce, took rural China back to an unprofitable situation in the 90’s — the time Dafen started its oil painting industry. Similar to other township industries, after training the peasant workers into competent artistically skilled workers, Dafen integrates the cheap labor from hinterland and cheap rent in the urban village into vast amounts of low-price oil painting products, which enters the global market through convenient trade approaches. However, the special nature of fine arts to “educate and cultivate human beings through literature and culture” makes Dafen’s oil painting industry different from others: at an earlier stage, the artistic training in Dafen was flow line-type skill training only for workshops of low-skilled painting workers, but today it has evolved into quality-oriented training open to students, painting workers and painters, which makes Dafen competent to export outwardly the oil painting products and supply inwardly human resource specialized in fine arts. Therefore, it becomes possible for Dafen to introduce quality-oriented education into a pure Fordist art production, through enriching the value of human resources of getting involved in creative industry, and to cope with Pearl River Delta’s bottleneck situation caused by the shrinking of the export-oriented economy and the increase of labor costs.
Forming a single line, people at the painter’s workshop gather at the cafeteria for their meals.
© Haibo Yu
Made-in-China
People's Republic of China has produced two kinds of “Made in China” during the 60-year industrialization process. One is the model of "made by large state-owned enterprises" in the previous three decades, which mainly focuses on capital-intensive heavy industry; the other is "made by private enterprises," gradually forming in the latter three decades, majorly in the labor-intensive light industry sector. Made-in-Dafen stands alongside with the latter one, so Dafen has parallel characteristics like its stressing "quantity" rather than "quality," using low price as its core competitiveness, ranking low in the global industrial chain, but still able to obtain decent economic benefit thanks to its model to sacrifice small profit for larger sales volume; the manufacturing entities are mainly the small, medium enterprises responsible for their own profit and loss; it has the shadow of family workshop or fellow townsmen enterprises beneath the modern enterprise system's organization surface; the boring assignments on the flow lines; and the scenery of labor-intensive manufacturing production which shifts among the factory building, dining hall, dormitory and warehouse constituting the image of "sweatshop" of "Made in China." Similar to other leading industries in their respective industrial chains, Dafen's oil painting industrialization also brings a chance for industries like painting color, canvas, frame and other materials. What's more, through the clusterization of industries related to oil painting, it has had a radioactive effect on logistics, catering and other service business around Dafen. The oil painting products "made in Dafen," together with other "Made in China" products including clothing, toys, home appliances and commodities, export into remote market in Middle East, Africa, Europe and America. The informal economy of Dafen is embodied by the formal image of "Western Fine Arts"; its products cover almost all of the genre generations in western art history, processing them into amusing goods massively assembled on the flow line. The amazing uniqueness of Dafen is its accomplishment to mix the aura of classical western aesthetics into the primitive capital accumulation process of an eastern agricultural country within the international industrial and business chain. Amid the worship type of imitation and the mechanical reproduction, Dafen presents a great tension between the lofty and the humble, the dream and reality.

Industrial Village, Urban Village, Urban Community
Dafen is also the spatial result of the successive collision of the three elements: land collectivization in rural areas, clusterization of oil painting industry and integration of regions outside and inside Shenzhen. In the time of agriculture, Dafen was merely one of the villages scattered around Pearl River delta's alluvial plain, most of which have experienced fierce transformation of de-agriculturalization in the three decades of Reform and Opening-up. Villages on the outskirts have changed into production-oriented industrial villages, while those located in downtown turn into consumption-oriented urban villages, and almost all the urbanized industrial villages later experienced another round of "de-industrialization" and became urban villages depending on collective property and estate at large. The security policy as the legacy from an urban-rural dual system, including the house sites, residence registration system and so on, isolates those industrial villages and urban villages into a cluster of prehistoric solitary islands in the wave of modern industrialization and urbanization. It is the non-agricultural villages built upon these house sites that lower the threshold of entire Pearl River delta, to provide living space for external small and medium enterprises as well as low-skilled workers, decreasing the cost and enhancing the region's competitiveness within the global industrial chain. Dafen is distinctive not only due to its fast and complete transformation from the countryside to industrial village to urban village and finally to urban streets and community; it has partly retained its productive nature as a oil painting industry base along with the urban reshaping process, combining the supply created by industrialization and the demand stemming from urbanization within the existing space, and formulating a "SOHO urban village" type of community model. Thus, the particular space produced by China's rural urbanization in the field of informal industry during the past 20 years is preserved as historical heritage and gets interpreted into the particularity of creative industry, the particularity usually getting erased in urban village reconstruction project, and is actually the capital Dafen utilizes to break through the bottleneck of "Made-in-China" and locates itself among "Created-in-China" business.
In the evenings, artists will clear their own areas and that space becomes their home.
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Creative Industry, Community Ecology
At the end of the last century, the significance of coastal SEZ was gradually weakened when their experimental experience was promoted through the country. Shenzhen had to search for a more sustainable development model beyond its glorious “border economy,” so the Pearl River delta city with strong northern China culture background appeals to a “culture-oriented city”. In the time of “post-SEZ,” Shenzhen city is eager to re-orient itself and needs a “cultural industry base” as the prototype for policy support. Meanwhile, challenged by restless rising rent cost, Dafen’s oil painting industry also requires a prompt transformation from single manufacturing featured as “low profit but large sales volume.” Dafen’s debut as local producer and its brand establishment as the cultural card are driven by the resultant force of the initiative, bottom-up “informal development” and the posterior, top-down “self-consciousness.” The “Dafen Model,” which is “driven by market and led by government” is rightly set up and promoted under the effect of the resultant force. Dafen’s geographic location near the 2nd frontier determines its earlier initiation of the strategy “suppressing the second industry and developing the third one.” The establishment of a series of cultural institutions and public spaces, symbolized by Dafen Art Museum, strengthens Dafen’s position in industrial upgrade and its significance as the landmark in city management. When Dafen introduces consumptive space and public space, it also stresses the requirements on original creation. The upgrade of community also speeds up community industry to transform from imitation into creation, realizing the individual evolution from painting manufacturer to painting worker to a real painter and even an artist, so that Dafen’s community ecology will be more diverse. The public policies planned specially for creative talents in aspects of housing, residence registration etc. further highlight Dafen’s creative industry as a demonstrative sample on a micro level, making Dafen the “Special Cultural Zone” in the time of “post-SEZ.”

Dafen’s precautionary measures on independent innovation enable it to function continuously against the recent international background frustrating China’s export-oriented economy. Dafen therefore becomes the transformation paradigm for “Made-in-China” and “Chinese urbanization movement” in the new period: the industrial diversification mirrors the transformation process of “Made-in-China” towards a holistic, multilevel manufacturing system, and the diversification of community ecology reflects the model shift of “Chinese urbanization movement” from extensive to intensive development and construction. The sustainable model chosen by Dafen not only makes it the most distinctive among Shenzhen’s numerous urban villages, but also presents a reference for the regeneration course of Chinese cities on a broader sense. Now here come the next questions: Where is the further sustainability of Dafen? The spatial feature as a village-in-city has been preserved, but is it also possible to maintain Dafen’s industrial feature as an oil painting production village? How to imagine a Dafen still keeping its own characteristic when painting is no longer the leading industry? How to preserve the particularity of Dafen’s grassroots creation, and make it distinguished from other elitist artistic communities? 10 years later, will Dafen still be a sample for us to learn from? A Village by SEZ leaves these questions for our readers to investigate.

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At the narrow and tight space of dafen workshop, lovers show affection for each other during their short break.

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This illustration showcases the distribution of the Dafen painting industry and the relationship between its parts. Through the following pages, we explore the different building typologies that form this extraordinary network.