The rise of China's Song Zhuang art village

Artists have flocked to this small village on the outskirts of Beijing in the hope of finding fame and fortune, but many find success is not guaranteed

By Lara Farrar (/lara-farrar-492182) and Mitch Moxley (/author/mitch-moxley) 15 April, 2010

Gao Huijun is a Chinese oil painter who lives in Song Zhuang, an art village on the outskirts of Beijing. He has a big house behind a tall, brick wall with a red gate. Parked in front is his shiny black Cadillac, which he drives down the street to the private studio he owns. To those who visit him, Gao serves expensive Chinese tea and chocolates purchased when he's in Europe, which is twice a year.

Painter Guo Lizhong and sculptor Zhang Liyu in Zhang's studio. The two artists say life is challenging in Song Zhuang. It is not easy to sell their work, rents are on the rise and their futures there are uncertain.

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Life was not always like this for Gao, one of the first artists to move to the village in the mid-1990s after the government relocated them from their neighborhoods in Beijing to make room for new development projects. Looking for a new place to work, the bohemians chose to move to a rural, agricultural village that would be, at least moderately, off the radar screen of the state.

On the mantel above Gao's fireplace is a photo of him standing in a garden with tall flowers in front of the house he rented from local farmers. Life was rough back then. They were poor. But
he says the artists were happy because there, amidst the farmers and the fields, they could focus solely on their work.

“Here we had the ability to change our lives,” says Gao. “To come here and find ourselves.”

I meet Gao on the first of several trips I make to Song Zhuang over recent weeks. Over tea and chocolates and surrounded by his landscapes of misty mountains and rivers, we discuss the village’s history, how it has changed and where it is going in the future. The story is a complex one, and, as with most things in China, the real situation is found in the subtext rather than on the surface.

798 it is not

One thing to know about Song Zhuang is it is not, yet, a 798, the famous, and some say overly commercialized, art district in Beijing often overrun with tourists, expats and posh, hipster Chinese.

Getting there involves a long drive east on the Jing Tong Expressway, past factories, half-finished apartment buildings and tangled webs of power lines feeding electricity to the capital’s population of 20 million. The place itself is a scene of desolation.

Aside from migrant workers hauling carts of dirt and bricks, Song Zhuang’s roads, lined with small stores selling paint, pipes and vegetables, are usually empty.

Unless there is a major exhibition, most of the galleries are vacant or closed. To experience Song Zhuang, it takes friending someone who knows the artists who live there. Or simply knocking on doors with the hope one will invite you in for some tea and a talk (some of the residents are foreigners and a few of the Chinese artists speak English, but it is best to speak Mandarin or have someone come along who can translate).

Poor and starving to rich and famous

Zhao Lei, one of the founders of Hong Kong’s contemporary Yan Gallery who has a home in Song Zhuang, introduces me to his circle of friends there, including Gao.

“Here you cannot imagine how many rich artists there are,” Zhao tells me as we drive through the community of 10 small villages. “Before 2000, they were starving.”

And not entirely welcome, according to Gao.

While the farmers quickly learned they could earn extra cash by selling or renting their homes to the artists, the local government wanted them out. The police would come “and kick on your door and yell and ask you to fill in papers,” says Gao. “They wanted to make you constantly afraid you had to leave.”

Finally, around 2004, the government allowed them to officially stay. At the same time, a growing interest in Chinese contemporary art abroad turned a number of Song Zhuang’s original inhabitants from poor and starving artists into rich and famous ones. (Aside from Gao, other illustrious residents include Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun, who were also among the first group of artists to move to Song Zhuang.)
Artists migration

Word of the fame and fortune the painters found in Song Zhuang soon spread across the country, causing a mass migration of thousands of unknown artists to the village with the hope of making a name for themselves. Today, around 4,000 artists live in the community, and many more are expected to arrive as Beijing continues to demolish artist neighborhoods within the city to make way for new development projects.

For most, life is not easy. The financial crisis combined with rising rents has caused many to abandon their dreams in the village, according to an article published in February on chinanews.com.

"Only a few can sell their work for good prices while the rest are still struggling on the poverty line," the article says. "Those who are not famous copy from those who are famous, and those who are famous reproduce the work that made them famous."

Not all chocolate and caviar

Song Zhuang resident artist Guo Li Zhong is not famous. And he is struggling. Over the past year, Guo has managed to sell only a handful of his paintings of tiny, pastel-colored fairies. To make ends meet, he teaches on the side, as many other artists in Song Zhuang do.

Guo also spends most of his time hanging out with his friend Ming, an executive at a software company, who recently bought a home in Song Zhuang, yet another sign of changes in the community.

"Guys like me moving in, that is trouble," says Ming, who declines to give his first name. "For the management, it is business. It has nothing to do with art. They can lease the land and get some money for the local villagers."

Local villagers will likely earn even more money from the property in the near future if a 50-billion yuan plan unfolds to revamp Tongzhou district (where Song Zhuang is located) into a commercial epicenter by 2015. Already glitzy shopping malls, expensive restaurants and new apartment complexes are under construction.

10 years from now

Song Zhuang is likely to stay, but many say they fear it, too, will lose its spirit to commercial interests.

"By the year 2010, it will be developed into a famous artist town of China," according to a government Web site. "By the year 2020, it will be developed into the international culture creation industrial park and creation culture and tourism district with its own characteristics."

"There are plans but we don't know what they are," says Guo who, for now, will stay in the village.

"There are dreams you want and dreams that are not good for you," he adds. "Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between the two."

More looks at Song Zhuang and its residents
Yideer, a Beijing native who studied art in Inner Mongolia, stands in his Song Zhuang studio. He is known for a series of work in which he puts on makeup and inserts images of himself into scenes and monuments of special significance during the Cultural Revolution.

Gao Huijun was one of the first wave of artists to move to Song Zhuang in the mid-1990s. He is now regarded as one of elite artists in the village, selling oil paintings internationally for thousands of dollars.
Renowned art critic Li Xianting in his Song Zhuang home. Many artists Li promoted became leading figures in China's avant-garde art movement.
A workspace in art critic Li Xianting's home. Li is sometimes referred to as the "Godfather of Chinese contemporary avante-garde art."

A man flips through books of poetry on sale at Song Zhuang.
Like the more famous Factory 798 Art District, many artists turn abandoned factories like this one into work spaces.

Zhang Liyu, an artist from the northern port city of Tianjin. His studio is a converted farmhouse reminiscent of the homes the original Song Zhuang artists lived in when they first arrived.
Zhang Donghong paintings often feature giant pictures of fruit, such as watermelons. He says they are popular among “white collar” foreigners.

Getting there

1. First take metro to Guo Mao station, and then take bus No. 938 (sub-line 9) to Song Zhuang Art Gallery.
2. First take metro to Beijing Station, and then take bus No. 938 (sub-line 4) to Xiao Pu Village (a village within the town of Song Zhuang).
3. Take a taxi from Guo Mao station to Song Zhuang, price is about 60RMB.

Originally from Hot Springs, Arkansas, Lara moved to Shanghai to work as a journalist in 2008. Before that, she wrote for CNN International in London.

Read more about Lara Farrar (/lara-farrar-492182)

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Now it's 2013 and three years on from the article. Very interestingly, there have been no prior comments! SongZhuang is now gaining traction as an artist area, with galleries, training schools, artistic associations and the like also becoming fixtures of the community. Attention is being paid to the art scene out there, and the art is maturing into a viable offering to China's artistic landscape.