Still China’s Van Goghs?
Negotiating the self-positioning as an “artist” with practical means of living in Dafen Village

1 introduction

“China’s Van Goghs”
- refers to the painter-workers in Dafen Oil Painting Village, Shenzhen, whose archetypical image is created by popular media as churning out commercial, manual replicas of Western masterpieces

2 research question

How do painter-workers and shopowners in Dafen Village, Shenzhen, negotiate their self-positioning in relation to the Western-dominated discourses on the “artist”?
- How do they negotiate the self-positioning as an “artist” with practical means of surviving?
- How is the Western-dominated discourse on creativity and authenticity domesticated and appropriated in Dafen?

3 mode of inquiry/methodology

Interview
- In-depth, face-to-face onsite interviews, about 40 mins each
- About 5 informal interviews with visitors and shop owners in Dafen village

Participant observation
- 3 two-day or three-day field trips
- Participated in the “paint your own masterpiece” commercial activity to observe the particular business mode

Visual analysis
- Comparing Zhou Yongjiu’s brushstrokes to those of Van Gogh’s
- Mounting a visual comparison between oil paintings which are thoroughly manual and those with a machine-printed base with the help of Zhou Yongjiu

4 findings

Four typical modes of practice
- The Craftsman on the Ground Floor
  - Zhou Yongjiu & Zhao Xisoyong
- The Van Gogh Underground
  - Zeng Muquan
- The Airbnb Host on the Fifth Floor
  - Zeng Muquan
- The Gallerists with a six-year-old Dream
  - Jellypaint

5 conclusion and reflection

Internalized political rhetorics/discourses
- Mutual reinforcement between Shenzhen’s self-branding and the Dafen spirit
- Personal narratives

The grandeur and precarity of the creative economy & cultural production
- “The effort to promote the Dafen painter in the guise of the dreaming-and-preserving worker, while denying them this realization at every turn, serves pointedly to reify their endless striving” (Wong, 2013)
- The new social structure of a “creative economy” and its neoliberal outlook smooth over, legitimize, and normalize job insecurities

Fieldwork as method
- Micro-narratives versus generalization
- From an interactionist perspective: the presentation of self

References


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