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On the Sustainability of Industrial Heritage Creative Clusters: the Case of M50, Shanghai

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Abstract

With the introduction of the UN's 2030 Agenda (Sustainable Development Goals) and a new emphasis on both culture and the ecological environment in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025, inclusive), we now face a significant test case for global development. The future trajectory of industrial heritage creative clusters in China has drawn increasing attention, in part as it is becoming increasingly clear how global development (all over the world) has been propelled by urbanisation. As a selective presentation on what remains from a glorious industrial past, whether London or Shanghai, industrial heritage clusters face their own question on the future — how can they achieve sustainable development and become an active factor in a city's historical evolution? This article takes the M50 Creative Cluster in Shanghai to survey what remains of its 20-year development trajectory in the context of the city's evolving urban development. This article explores the potential driving forces for an ongoing sustainability, as well as the constraints clusters faces; it aims to provide insights for a policy agenda that integrates cultural policy and urban sustainability. The article first reviews the global and Chinese trajectories of industrial heritage creative clusters and then surveys relevant literature on creative clusters and their sustainable development. Using Lily Kong's framework for understanding the sustainability of creative clusters, the article offers a detailed assessment of M50's development path, summarising its dynamic patterns and offering reflections that may inform the sustainable development of similar creative clusters.

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Introduction

Since the structural transformation of the agrarian economies of the West — through large-scale industrial production in the 18th-19th century — the industrial revolution became internal to the process of world-wide colonisation. It was only in the second half of the Twentieth Century that ‘heritage’ could be co-joined to the word ‘industrial’ notwithstanding the many historical associations and conservationist movements that had evolved since the previous century. First, there came ‘industrial archeology’ in England in the 1950s, and then the UNESCO-recognised International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage of the late 1970s. Today, Industrial Heritage is a widely recognised term, spawning areas of specialisation, one of which is creative (or cultural) clusters. Increasingly attracting the attention of urban planners, it was England that provided internationally influential exemplars of industrial heritage through its government-driven ‘urban regeneration’ of the 1980s; while this was initially driven by a widespread deindustrialisation in the face of the rise of Asian economies, it also featured innovations in cultural policy, architecture and urban planning (Robinson 2020, cited in Qian 2023), all of which intersected with the emergence of clusters.

Since the 1980s, we have seen many modes of ‘adaptive reuse’, renovation, revitalisation or re-design of old, historical, abandoned, disused or simply neglected industrial facilities. The many ways in which the fragmented remains of an old industrial infrastructure can be re-purposed is manifold, often involving new creative industries, leisure and entertainment facilities, retail, residential and even institutions of higher education. In China, the formation of industrial heritage creative clusters has been influenced by broader forces of including industrial restructuring, land reform, and systemic trends in cultural policy, like the ‘creative cities’ phenomenon (Niu et al. 2018). Since the introduction of the ‘Reform and Opening-up’ policy in 1978, and the consequent shift in economic system from centrally planned to a ‘socialist market economy with Chinese

characteristics’, conventional state-owned industrial firms and corporations declined dramatically, leaving behind their empty facilities or even major industrial-scale spaces, almost in every major city.

By the 1990s, not only did these defunct state-owned firms continue to have land-use rights in their former factory areas, but they also gained the power to turn this land into profitable real estate. As commercial redevelopment, in most instances, involved the paying of extra tax and fees to local government (that was steadily ‘marketising’ their bureaucratic management), converting industrial facilities into another financially viable facility was only logical. In one sense, the ‘clusters’ phenomenon began as a pragmatic means of offering a range of viable spaces or accommodation to smaller, international or student start-up businesses at a lower cost and contractual commitment than inner-city business-districts. Western cultural policy influences (like the ‘creative cluster’ notion) came later. The immediate rental model that emerged simply involved the corporate (state) owners transferring their own financial liability on the basis of a steadily increasing rental revenue, all the while maintaining the original land use (obviating legal demands). Local government could only allow this development, which in theory could be reversed at any time, as it appeared to make no substantive demands on land use.

Yet, within a decade, the occupants and new enterprises of the industrial sites, both enhanced and adapted to the old industry facilities, and added value to the otherwise functional architecture and built environment of a previous industrial era. What began as abandoned industrial facilities, became a process of adaptive re-use, renovation, revitalisation and re-design — often with brand, marketing and cultural dimensions. By the great World ‘Expo 2010 Shanghai’ was held on both banks of the Huangpu River (1 May to 31 October), Shanghai was recognised as a global centre for new business, creative and cultural clusters. And by this time, it had demonstrated both the design efficacy and business viability of the Western ‘cluster’ notion.

By the year 2000, Shanghai’s urban development

was the subject of an historical periodisation in which cultural-creative clusters were visibly situated (Wang, 2020). The development of clusters can now be phrased (provisionally) as three distinct phases: Emergence and Spontaneous Development (1992-2004), Rapid Development (2005-2007), and Prosperity and Regulation (2008-2010) (Wang 2020). In the most recent phase, they have become integrated into a broader urban renewal and heritage conservation policy framework. This developmental trajectory reflects China's experimental approach in integrating cultural, industrial, and spatial resources, but also its use of historical periodisation in its development planning.

However, gaps remain within the current body of research. On the one hand, existing studies have focused on spatial transformation, economic performance, and policy instruments, with relatively limited attention paid to how creative clusters engage with the multiple values of industrial heritage (i.e. from the perspectives of cultural sustainability and the reproduction of historical memory). On the other hand, as the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals continue to gain traction, both cultural and political dimensions of development are increasingly recognised as integral perspectives for advancing comprehensive sustainable development (Kagan 2008; James 2014, both cited in Niu et al. 2018). In China, from 2021, the 14th Five-Year Plan has similarly re-emphasised the significance of cultural development and ecological concerns. This shift necessitates a critical reassessment of the future of industrial heritage-based creative clusters: Is the collective memory of socialist industry being marginalised in the name of development? Might the selective representation or nostalgic framing of this memory influence the evolution of urban cultural identity and collective consciousness? More importantly, how can a city realise forward-looking cultural and spatial sustainable development grounded in a legacy of industrial brilliance? These are pressing questions that require a deeper investigation than one article.

As a way of preparing the research ground for such an investigation, this paper takes the M50 Creative Cluster in Shanghai as a case study. It

focused on its development over the past two decades, and does so within the broader context of shifting urban development priorities. The broad aim is to assess the most recent conditions for the evolution of clusters, i.e. to analyse the cluster's internal drivers of sustainability, the institutional frameworks that support it, and the real-world constraints it faces. In doing so, the study seeks to provide both theoretical insight and practical guidance for the ongoing evolution of industrial heritage creative clusters in the city, by implication in other major cities. By integrating cultural, spatial, and industrial logics, this research aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable development in Shanghai and other urban contexts.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first is an overview of the methodological approach, drawing particularly on Lily Kong's (2009) theoretical framework; second is an in-depth empirical analysis of the developmental trajectory of M50; and finally, we engage in a discussion of the broader implications of this dynamic evolution for the sustainable development of similar clusters elsewhere.

2. Methodology

This article was written as part of a broader project, where data was collected through a combination of document analysis and field observation. The immediate sources are academic journal articles, government reports, online media, and official documentation from the website of the M50. Field visits to the M50 site were conducted on 5 June 2018 and in December 2022. The observation analysis of the field work focused on the following aspects of the cluster: architectural form, tenancy and enterprise categories, the environmental conditions of artistic production, and short interactions with selected artists. This study draws on Kong's (2009) conceptualisation of sustainable development both within creative clusters and in their broader urban context, with which to organise and analyse data. It considers the standard four core dimensions — economic, cultural, social, and environmental. From a methodological perspective, the case study approach is necessary

in penetrating the cluster complex, but there are obvious limitations. Shanghai's clusters are all quite specific to a location and history, and yet we must attempt to generalise. Moreover, the cultural approach and interests in aesthetics requires a researcher-dependent subjectivity and broad interpretative approach, with endemic viewpoint bias (Yin 1984).

3. Sustainability as Participatory Culture: The Case of M50 in Shanghai

3.1 Shanghai Background

The development of industrial heritage clusters in Shanghai gradually shifted from an initial emphasis on economic growth towards a focus on cultural value and social impact. Unlike traditionally industrialised nations, China's history of industrialisation is relatively short, from the First Opium War in 1840. Our principle reference point is the more recent founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, where socialist state-owned enterprises were rapidly expanded. After the economic reforms of 1978, the implementation of the 'relocating secondary industries and developing the tertiary sector' (退二进三) strategy accelerated industrial restructuring, especially in Shanghai. Traditional state-owned enterprises entered a period of decline, while adjustments to the urban industrial infrastructure led to the closure or relocation of many of the large factories. As a result, huge areas of industrial land emerged within central urban districts, gradually becoming derelict. In the course of urban renewal and infrastructure expansion, much of the socialist industrial heritage was physically demolished — signifying not only physical transformation but also the erasure of socialist memory (Qian 2023). Since 1998, state-owned enterprises have been permitted to dispose of allocated land-use rights, ushering in a new phase of reuse. With the combined forces of industrial restructuring, land reform, (and later, cultural policy directives) creative clusters began to emerge from a newly created industrial heritage (Zheng 2011). Early on, the Shanghai municipal government recognised the potential of these enclaves and quickly developed regulations to guide the reuse process.

In 1992, Shanghai introduced the Measures for the Protection and Management of Outstanding Modern Architecture in Shanghai, which was the first to articulate a conception of modern architectural protection. This policy defined Outstanding Modern Architecture as buildings or building complexes constructed between 1840 and 1949, which possessed historical, artistic, or scientific value. These buildings were classified according to three levels of protection: National-level key cultural heritage sites; Shanghai municipal-level key heritage sites; and Municipal architectural heritage sites designated and protected by the city government based on local conditions. The first two levels fall under the jurisdiction of national cultural heritage law, while the third is locally administered. Notable examples in the city include the Yangshupu Waterworks and the former Shanghai Brewery buildings. In 2003, the scope of industrial heritage protection was expanded to include buildings constructed after 1949. Article 25 of the Regulations on the Protection of Historic Cultural Features and Outstanding Historic Buildings in Shanghai introduced a four-tier classification system for Outstanding Historic Buildings, ranked from highest to lowest (Level 1 to Level 4):

1. The building's façade, structural system, floor plan, and interior decoration must not be altered.
2. Facades with distinctive architectural features, structural systems, and essential floor plans and interiors must be preserved, while other elements may be modified.
3. The façade and structural system must be retained, though interior modifications are permitted.
4. The primary façade must be preserved; other parts may be modified.

In 2006, the Functional Transformation of Buildings Regulations further strengthened the orientation of adaptive reuse, raising the level of government intervention. For reuse projects of industrial heritage, there were further requirements set by the Shanghai government, including the 2009 Technical Specifications on the Protection and Monitoring of Industrial Heritage, aimed at securing that proper conservation methods were employed and that there were high standards of safety. While control systems for the

protection and reuse of industrial heritage developed, the Shanghai municipal government started to actively foster the creation of creative clusters as a means of standardizing methods on industrial heritage sites and pursuing wider regeneration objectives (Wang and Wang 2018).

Concurrently, the Shanghai municipal government began to recognise the value of space in the city and introduced a mechanism of creative cluster accreditation. This allowed for upgrading of space in terms of its adaptive functionality, gradually institutionalising the hitherto informal, creative-driven occupancy of facility. In 2005, the Key Guidelines for Development of Creative Industries in Shanghai, together with the 11th Five-Year Plan, set out the target of creating over 100 creative clusters. A city-level system of accreditation was also set up, providing both architectural and industrial policy support for creative cluster upgrading. The now-famous Shanghai World Expo in 2010 offered the city an unprecedented opportunity in reassessing earlier approaches (such as Western style 'regeneration' and UNCTAD-style creative economy). In its wake, the UNESCO Creative Cities (Shanghai) Promotion Office was opened, with the task of promoting innovation and creativity in the city. This was the point of emergence for a new model of public management — from 'investor' to 'facilitator'. The facilitator role interconnected urban development and planning with heritage reuse and industrial upgrade for the creative industries.

Through the efforts of dedicated working groups and promotion offices, local municipal authorities began to revise their policy orientation from focusing on industrial upgrading to embracing the broader vision of city-wide 'making the city better' (Wang and Wang 2018). In 2017, central government published the Opinions on Deepening Organic Urban Renewal and Promoting the Conservation of Historic Landscapes (jointly published by the Ministry of Housing, and Urban-Rural Development), which introduced the concept of 'land lifecycle management' and identified public interest and the authenticity of heritage as core governance priorities. Concurrently, there were attempts aimed at the integration of industry, culture, and community

development, with a call for creative clusters to offer publicly accessible services and create social value. Urban culture was clearly set as a major development target in the 14th Five-Year Plan, and a disintegrated 'conservationist' approach began to emerge.

3.2 The M50 Creative Cluster: Background and Current Challenges

The M50 Creative Cluster is located at 50 Moganshan Road in Shanghai's Putuo District, along the banks of Suzhou Creek. As one of the earliest creative industry agglomeration zones in Shanghai, the site covers approximately 41m (about 2.7 hectares). Featuring industrial heritage buildings of the 1930s and the 1990s, collectively, they reflect the developmental history of China's national textile industry, making M50 a focal point on the now-regenerated district (and popular visitor walkway) of Suzhou Creek. It has been officially designated as a protected cultural heritage site.

M50's history traces back to 1937, when it was founded as the Xinhe Cotton Mill. It went through several changes in names and industries throughout the decades. In 2001, Xue Song established his personal studio at the site, becoming the first artist to settle in what was then M50. His arrival marked the beginning of a spontaneous clustering of artists in the area (Luan 2016). In 2002, this region was declared an 'Chunming Urban Industrial Park' and in 2004 was officially the M50 Creative Cluster. Over time, it developed as a multifunctional creative hub that incorporated artistic production, exhibition and display, design, as well as cultural consumption. M50 has gained numerous accolades and titles, including as National Industrial Tourism Demonstration Site (Shanghai Industrial Design Association 2020). It is now considered a flagship example of urban spatial renewal and industrial heritage reuse aligned with Shanghai's cultural policy agenda. Despite its achievements, M50 faces multiple challenges in relation to sustainable development. Economically, while the commercial success of the cluster has brought opportunities, the rising commercial interests have threatened the creation of an artistic 'ecosystem'. Rising rents have led to a decline in artistic production, raising

concerns about whether artists will continue to remain in the cluster. In terms of space and infrastructure, M50 needs to improve its public facilities and community environment, and there remain serious questions on sustainability and the new generation of artists and creative professionals.

Social sustainability as a critical issue is most apparent in the relationship between the artist community and surrounding neighbourhoods. As a case study, M50 offers analytical value. On one hand, it demonstrates how creative industries can effectively activate industrial heritage spaces and contribute to the reconstruction of regional cultural ecosystems. On the other, it exposes institutional bottlenecks and real-world tensions related to commercialisation pressure, community engagement, and infrastructure renewal. This case will indicate M50's transformation pathway and sustainability challenges through the four dimensions of economy, culture, society, and environment. The aim is to provide practical and policy-relevant insights for similar industrial heritage regeneration projects.

3.3 Economic Sustainability

M50, as a subsidiary of Shanghai Textile Group, benefited significantly from this institutional framework. In the course of its evolution as a creative cluster, M50's commercial success has been closely tied to its rental strategy and the continual optimisation of its revenue model — both of which have contributed to the cluster's economic sustainability.

Strategic Rental Mechanism

Like many other creative clusters, rental rates at M50 have steadily increased since 2000, rising from approximately RMB 0.3–0.4 per square metre per day to a current peak of around RMB 3 per square metre (Dong 2006). However, unlike other clusters, M50 adopted a distinctive leasing strategy to prevent high rents from hindering the long-term development of the cluster. Tenants at M50 are divided into two categories. The first consists of the earliest resident artists, they continue to benefit from preferential rent rates. The next category consists of later entrants — creative businesses, artists, and cafes — who

entered in response to M50's growing reputation and started capitalizing on the cluster's 'brand power' for commercial purposes. Their rents are considerably higher: typical spaces cost RMB 5-5.5 per square meter daily (Shanghai Chuangyiyuan 2019). This multi-tier rent system successfully harmonises affordability with pioneering artists — securing their creative ground and the artistic environment of the cluster — and financial gain through commercial tenants paying higher rents. This dual system allows for a stable income stream while safeguarding the site's creative identity. Most importantly, M50 has avoided becoming a property-driven development that relies solely on rents. Instead, it has constantly sought to be a true creative cluster, a stable and equal environment for cultural belonging and artistic production.

Evolution of the Profit Model

In addition to M50, numerous emerging artist studios and cultural creative industry clusters have appeared across Shanghai in recent years. In 2015, the rise of the West Bund Cultural and Arts Demonstration Zone offered alternative options for galleries, prompting some former M50 tenants — such as Eastlink Gallery and MadIn Gallery — to relocate. These developments led to a reduction in M50's core activities, a loss of tenants, and a decline in visitor numbers, thereby challenging the cluster's core competitiveness. As a result, M50 has faced increasing pressure to explore new business models. To ensure the sustainable development of the cluster, M50's profit model has continuously evolved. Since 1999, this model has undergone three main phases: factory leasing, development as a creative cluster, and subsequent brand-oriented cluster expansion. In its earliest phase, the predecessor of M50 — Chunming Woolen Mill — ceased production under the city's 'relocating secondary industries and developing the tertiary sector' policy. To maintain income for its workforce, the factory initially leased space to small and noisy manufacturing units. In the second phase, following the arrival of renowned artists such as Xue Song after 2001, M50 began to cultivate a strong artistic atmosphere. By 2004, M50 was officially designated as one of Shanghai's first creative industry clusters.

Following this designation, the Shanghai Textile Group quickly realised that relying solely on the physical space of the M50 site — and on rental income and art sales — would limit the long-term development of the creative cluster. The business model needed to evolve beyond spatial constraints. From 2015 onward, M50 began to diversify its revenue streams through brand-driven creative cluster development. It repositioned itself as a provider of ‘artistic lifestyle services’, actively promoting the ‘Shanghai Culture’ brand through three strategic axes: ‘Art + Commerce’, ‘Culture + Leisure’, and ‘Creativity + Entertainment’. In support of this strategy, M50 launched its own brand ecosystem, which includes both the M50 Brand Cluster and the M50 Brand Centre. It also established long-term collaborations with aspiring international art institutions, offering a range of cultural services such as art exhibitions, spatial operations, cluster planning, commercial consulting, creative design, and curatorial projects. Moreover, M50 expanded into brand licensing and management. Through external partnerships and operational teams, it successfully launched new branded clusters, including the Xitaopu Creative Cluster and M50 Peninsula 1919 Creative Cluster. As a result, M50’s profit model has evolved from traditional real estate leasing to an emphasis on brand expansion and service-oriented operations — supporting its position as a dynamic and sustainable creative cluster.

However, with the onset of a new wave of Shanghai’s renewal and the ‘cold market period’ spurred by the pandemic, leading to the cancellation of all large-scale artistic events, M50 attempted to pursue new channels of external growth. In this pursuit, one of its endeavors is the creation of the M50 Shanghai Contemporary Art Week. This is a brand-owned initiative that was created by collaborating with different stakeholders in order to boost visibility and cultural impact. The 2021 edition of the M50 Shanghai Contemporary Art Week was organized around four main pillars: an artist’s book fair, concurrent exhibition openings, a lifestyle market, and an art forum. Throughout the course of the Art Week, the creative cluster hosted a series of events that brought together over 100 artists,

more than 30 art galleries, and nearly 40 high-calibre art exhibitions (Artron Art Index 2021). In addition to showcasing high-profile exhibitions, M50 also promoted the integration of art and business. At the M50 Market, visitors had the opportunity to engage in experiential activities with varying facets, including pottery, silver, calligraphy, tea ceremonies, and seal cutting — promoting a more interactive and accessible artistic environment. Although the success of the Art Week is significant in terms of artistic programming, further intersection with commercial mechanism is needed in order for it to sustain and grow its impact. A diversification of the revenue model — aside from tickets sold and ads — into rental fees for venues, performance requests, and alternative income streams seems necessary.

First, M50 continues to make reference to its core commitment to cultural and creative industries, aiming to attract leading enterprises and talent in the field. Second, it has introduced new experiential formats and client types, drawing large numbers of visitors and thereby promoting the popularisation of art consumption — broadening the base of the creative industry audience. Third, it has worked to strengthen the overall ‘M50’ brand identity. In addition, the cluster has launched the ‘Art Season’ programme to consolidate resources and expand public awareness. For instance, it has hosted international art festivals with the mission of establishing itself as a hallmark of Shanghai’s Haipai (海派) art culture — symbolising M50 as a microcosm of China’s reform and opening-up era. As such, with the ambition of becoming a ‘landmark of Haipai art and culture’, M50 is gradually shifting its role from that of a space manager to a cultural operator within the urban landscape.

3.4 Cultural Sustainability

In terms of cultural sustainability within the creative cluster, M50 supports internal cultural continuity by cultivating young artists and maintaining strict controls over the types of enterprises permitted within the cluster. Beyond its internal efforts, M50 also aims to further promote Shanghai’s local culture on a global scale

— positioning itself as both a cultural tourism destination and a platform for brand export, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of the city's international cultural profile.

Cultural Development Within the Cluster: Support for Artist Development

M50 supports its long-term resident artists by offering them significantly subsidised rent. These artists — often referred to as the cluster's core residents — maintain their galleries and studios within the site, using them for daily creation and public engagement. During field observations, the author witnessed artists actively creating and interacting with visitors. Many galleries are artist-run, and the artistic atmosphere throughout the cluster is both vibrant and deeply rooted. In addition, M50 has implemented talent development programmes aimed at nurturing emerging artists. Since 2007, M50 has hosted the philanthropic event Creative M50, designed to discover and support new artistic talents in China (M Art Center 2015). The associated talent programme offers selected artists various forms of developmental support, including:

1. Access to exhibition opportunities through the integration of resources from the art world, creative industry clusters, art media, multinational corporations, and social organisations;
2. Provision of independent studio space;
3. Opportunities for internships, overseas study, and cultural exchange;
4. Support for both personal artistic production and the development of artistic products (Pan 2013).

Cultural Development Within the Cluster: Promotion of Youth and Children's Art

M50 also actively contributes to the development of youth art. It hosts creative markets for university students, encouraging their involvement in the creative industries, and supports children's art education. Events such as 'Student Entrepreneurship Fair', 'Spring Awakening', 'Youth Season', and 'The Zoo' provide platforms for young entrepreneurs to engage with creative businesses within the cluster. These initiatives foster cross-generational creative interaction and offer practical support, such as

access to development capital in exchange for equity from creative start-ups. As part of its Art Season programming, M50 positions itself as an incubator platform for emerging artists. As described by event organiser Zhou Bin, the aim is to create a collaborative, transactional, and interactive space where young artists can thrive — especially in the context of increasing cultural and artistic exchange across the Yangtze River Delta region.

Cultural Development Within the Cluster: Strict Regulation of Enterprise Types Within the Cluster

To preserve cultural sustainability, M50 enforces strict entry criteria for businesses seeking tenancy within the cluster. It has remained consistent with its strategic positioning by selectively introducing over 160 tenants — including artist studios, galleries, cultural enterprises, design firms, and creative retail outlets — from more than 20 countries and regions (The Paper, 2023). This careful curation reinforces the industrial character of the creative cluster, builds a coherent cultural ecosystem, and ensures internal cultural sustainability. In addition, M50 conducts evaluations of tenant organisations with the help of internal and external experts. This assessment process serves as a behavioural constraint mechanism and uses credit-based leverage to ensure alignment with the cluster's cultural values. During M50's ongoing transformation, a number of hybrid and trend-oriented institutions have also emerged within the cluster. These include spaces like Little Art Museum and Dihu Art, which combine new media and urban art with community-oriented programming. In contrast to traditional galleries, these hybrid institutions primarily cater to younger artists and audiences. Their design-forward spaces host forward-thinking exhibitions and also serve multifunctional purposes — acting simultaneously as media platforms, exhibition venues, and event hubs.

External Cultural Sustainability: A Distinctive Cultural Destination

One of the key features of M50's external cultural sustainability lies in its unique identity as a cultural destination. Now known its architectural character and the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage, M50 has been recognised as a National

AAA-rated Tourist Attraction, a National Industrial Tourism Demonstration Site, and a registered Shanghai Famous Trademark (Artron Art Index 2021). In 2021, as part of efforts to promote the 'Suzhou Creek Riverside' cultural brand, M50 was selected as one of the key venues for the inaugural Suzhou Creek Riverside Cultural Tourism Festival (Yan and Han 2021). By 2024, the M50 Creative Park hosted a total of 790 exhibitions and art-related events throughout the year, attracting approximately 2 million visitors from both China and abroad, with international tourists accounting for around 30% of the total. In 2025, the 'art space' M50 Creative Park, the 'retail space' Taikoo Li Qianshu, and the 'riverside space' Changhua Road Wharf Suzhou Creek Cruise collectively formed a distinctive cultural-commercial district along Moganshan Road in Putuo District. That same year, the area was officially designated as a Shanghai Municipal-Level Leisure and Tourism Street (People's Government of Putuo District, Shanghai 2025). Today, M50 is not only a creative arts cluster but also the site of a nationally recognised Night-time Cultural and Tourism Consumption Hub.

External Cultural Sustainability: Expanding Cultural Influence through Brand Export

M50 is not only a model of industrial heritage transformation into a creative cluster, but has also become a cultural brand synonymous with the creative reuse of industrial spaces in China. Its evolving identity as a brand-led enterprise has elevated M50 to the status of a cultural icon and significantly supported the cultural marketing of Shanghai.

First, M50 serves as one of Shanghai's key outward-facing promotional platforms. Since 2015, with the guiding principle of 'Opening Up', M50 has organised the yearly M50 Art Season, in its efforts to become a centre for Shanghai's cultural and creative industries. This principle reflects the concept: 'The world looks at China with Shanghai, and looks at Shanghai with M50'. Excellent examples are the 2016 Suzhou Creek Arts Festival, the Shanghai International Fashion Culture Festival, and 'Fashion Night', all of which have been attended by high volumes of visitors. For the 2016 Suzhou Creek Arts Festival, for example, daily average attendance during the

three-day festival was between 5,000 and 10,000 visitors (Su 2016). In addition, M50 has also worked with top-tier events and organizations like the Shanghai Contemporary Art Week, West Bund Art & Design, ART021, and Jing'an Sculpture Park, forming together a dynamic art corridor along the city's waterways. This 'One River, One Creek' project interlinks the Suzhou Creek, the Huangpu River, major exhibition hubs, and city parks, further boosting M50's cultural outreach. Through its diverse programming — the range of activities includes exhibitions, concurrent openings, arts education, experiential workshops, and creative competitions — M50 has programmed milestone cultural activities with a unique Shanghai flavor. Their objectives are to promote exchange, exchange, and cooperation in the areas of art and design, further cementing M50's global presence.

M50's internal and external efforts in cultural sustainability have been multi-dimensional. Internally, the cluster has developed a vibrant artistic environment by providing opportunities for senior artists and emerging talent. Externally, M50 has become a cultural icon of Shanghai, utilising brand-building and a full range of cultural activities in order to promote visibility and contribute to cultural diplomacy and the city's narrative. In the future, M50 could play an active part in cultural sustainable development, providing diverse and significant cultural experiences for a broader public and reaffirming its status as a case for productive reuse of industrial heritage in the age of creative city-making.

3.5 Social Sustainability

In order to promote social sustainable development in the creative cluster, M50 has set up internal industrial service platforms and constructed resource-sharing networks within and beyond the cluster. This assists in creating a cooperative community in the cluster. Furthermore, by broadening the audience base of the cluster from professionals in the field of art to the general public and by propagating children's artistic education, M50 has increased the public's contact with art. This has enhanced public tolerance and acceptance of artwork, and enabled

increased interaction between artists and the general public — thereby contributing to social sustainability outside of the cluster.

Social Development Beyond the Cluster: Bringing Art to the People

In 2013, the ‘M50 Joint Opening’ event was launched in coordination with the Shanghai Spring Salon and Art Fair, bringing together galleries located within the cluster (Zhou 2013). The initiative aimed to provide a shared platform for galleries, mobilising the collective artistic strength of the cluster to promote artists’ work and encourage collaboration among resident creatives. At the same time, M50 extended its outreach by introducing fashion industry services and constructing a more complete industry chain. Given that most cluster-based businesses are small in scale and concentrated in niche fields, M50 integrated external resources from the broader Shanghai Textile Group network. Key initiatives include the M50 Contemporary Ceramic Arts and Cultural Experience Platform, the Shang Street LOFT Fashion Designer Incubator, and the Shanghai International Fashion Centre. These platforms encouraged inter-firm collaboration and facilitated interaction in broader market contexts, promoting sustainable internal social development.

Social Development Beyond the Cluster: Bringing Art to the People

In 2015, M50 began to shift its focus from catering primarily to professional art audiences to making art accessible to the general public. The emphasis moved away from strictly academic and intellectual forms of contemporary art toward more communicative and interactive art experiences. To improve public understanding of and engagement with art, M50 launched a ‘Lifestyle Aesthetics’ initiative — an art experience programme that integrates the cluster’s diverse cultural resources. This initiative included offline events and workshops such as book fairs, leather crafting, and academic lectures, offering participants an immersive introduction to the charm of art and craftsmanship. The 2024 Lifestyle Aesthetics curriculum comprises 45 courses across four thematic areas: artistic creativity, culinary sharing, intangible cultural heritage experiences,

and fashion aesthetics (Shanghai Textile Museum 2024).

Social Development Beyond the Cluster: The ‘Nongtang (Alley) Project’

To foster meaningful connections between local residents, visitors, and artists, M50 introduced the ‘Nongtang Project’ in 2022 — a public artwork embedded within community spaces. Focused around Building 4 (a former-spinning workshop), the project consisted of six modules: ‘Nongtang Weaving Memories’, an artwork drawing on historical tastes and tapestry traditions of the location; ‘Nongtang Classrooms’, in-situ teaching activities in partnership with art academies, museums of textiles, and local resident groups; ‘Nongtang Public Art Competition’, fuelling students’ practice and incubation of emerging artists; ‘Nongtang Co-creation’, evoking public participation in creation, allowing citizens to be active participants; ‘Nongtang Library Co-building Plan’, in gathering books from M50 galleries and studios in order to create casual reading and resting spaces within the cluster; ‘Nongtang Market’, welcoming local residents and lifestyle craftspeople to co-host a creative market (Shanghai Observer 2022). These public artwork projects have helped to construct a harmonious society, stimulating creativity, preserving historical memory, decorating public spaces, and driving local economies.

Social Development Beyond the Cluster: Fostering Youth Art Development

In the field of children’s art education, M50 launched the inaugural M50 International Children’s Creative Art Competition in 2017. By organising this competition, M50 aimed to draw attention from various sectors of society to the cultivation of children’s creativity, while identifying and nurturing creative talent and establishing a platform for international exchange in children’s creative arts (Liu 2017). During the three-month submission period, the competition’s online platform received over 5,000 entries and generated more than 6.6 million shares (Shanghai Textile Holding Group 2017). A total of 200 shortlisted works were exhibited at M50, marking the first time that children’s artworks were showcased within a professional art space. A

charity auction, held as the final highlight of the event, saw 47 pieces successfully auctioned, raising a total of 45,600 RMB (Shanghai Textile Holding Group 2017). All proceeds from the auction and associated donations were donated to the Shanghai Soong Ching Ling Foundation – Love Mom Charity Fund, in support of art education for children in underprivileged areas. In 2021, the fifth edition of the competition incorporated a post-event participatory component, whereby award-winning children were invited to contribute to the micro-renewal of the M50 art district (Zhang 2021). Under the guidance of scholars and practitioners specialising in public art, the participants engaged in the full project cycle — from topic selection to implementation — thereby gaining first-hand experience of the transformation of a public project from conception to realisation. By leveraging its artistic resources, M50 utilised the competition as a platform to foster dialogue between contemporary art, childhood creativity, and community development.

M50 has not only achieved economic viability but has also made a contribution to social sustainable development both within and beyond the cluster. Through the establishment of internal platforms and the organisation of socially inclusive activities, M50 has created opportunities for artists, entrepreneurs, and the public to connect, collaborate, and engage with art. These initiatives have promoted cultural exchange, fostered greater appreciation of art, and strengthening the bonds between creative practice and everyday urban life.

3.6 Environmental Sustainability

Suzhou Creek, being one of the cradles of China's national industry, is of great historical value in the formation of Shanghai's modern commerce and industry. With continual urban renewal along its riverbank, numerous formerly abandoned industrial cultural landmarks have been renovated and repurposed, developing into energetic hubs of commerce and the arts. Under this circumstance, the creation of the M50 Creative Cluster has been of significance — in both setting up a center for innovation and modern art but also for supporting the environmental sustainable growth of the

Suzhou Creek region. This redevelopment maintained historical monuments but infused new vigor into the city's cultural scene.

Industrial Heritage

Along the banks of Suzhou Creek are three designated historic conservation areas, as well as numerous examples of modern architecture, including the Astor House Hotel, the former British Consulate-General in Shanghai, and the Russian Consulate-General (Suzhou Creek Forum 2007). They embody the spatial, material, and decoration characteristics of Shanghai's industrial growth and form a fundamental part of the city's cultural legacy. They require preservation and thoughtful reuse. M50, being an outstanding industrial reuse model, learns from the natural environment of Suzhou Creek and has evolved into a flagship of Shanghai's micro-urban renewal planning. It has kept a 'conservation first, development later' principle. The complex emphasises the preservation of the primary facades of warehouse premises with targeted renovation and repair of workshop infrastructure. Of special note are the pitched-roof brick-and-timber buildings of the 1930s, which were subject to structural deterioration due to long years of disrepair. The cluster has undertaken restoration works to preserve their original form, protecting both the architectural character and the latent historical and functional values of these spaces. In addition, renovation activities by tenants are strictly regulated to prevent damage to the original fabric of the buildings.

Thus, despite hosting a wide array of modern uses — such as artist studios, galleries, film production companies, and art cafés — M50 cannot rightly be said to have compromised its industrial heritage. On the contrary, creative activities have imbued the historical buildings with new life and a distinct cultural identity.

Extending Environmental Influence

Beyond the confines of the cluster, M50 has contributed to enhancing the artistic atmosphere in the surrounding urban environment. Through the integration of graffiti art, artistic products, and design with built form, M50 has fostered active engagement with nearby communities and streetscapes, creating a multidimensional ripple

effect across a two-kilometre radius. M50 became nationally recognised for its vibrant graffiti culture and emerged as a major centre for street art in Shanghai. Over the years, this wall became a dynamic canvas for ever-changing graffiti, generating a unique urban cultural landscape. However, in 2021, the launch of the Tian'an Qianshu Shopping Centre led to the demolition of half the cluster's 600-metre graffiti wall along Moganshan Road (Lu 2020). In response, BKSTORE collaborated with M50 and the Art Shanghai Fair to invite 12 prominent domestic graffiti artists to create new works within the cluster. M50 designated new spaces for graffiti and hosted flash graffiti events to continue the legacy of Shanghai's street art culture.

While maintaining the orderliness of urban micro-renewal, M50 has remained committed to street art's freedom and vibrancy. As part of the city's vision for a continuous Suzhou Creek waterfront walkway, M50 presents a cultural landmark that reflects Shanghai's openness, creativity, and inclusiveness. As one local resident put it, "This area used to feel derelict, but the graffiti has brought it back to life — it leaves a lasting impression". Located near the Suzhou Creek and adjacent to neighbourhood destinations such as Xingyue Furniture Mall and Tianyi Sunshine Peninsula Sky Garden, M50 has become a cultural focal point within the wider urban district who may be oblivious of its work.

The Natural Environment

The 21-kilometre waterfront of Suzhou Creek represents a core element of Shanghai's ambition to become an 'excellent global city'. The area's industrial heritage and water-based ecological assets play an essential role in the city's environmental renewal. Against this backdrop, M50 serves as a valuable case study for exploring the intricate relationships between riverfront vibrancy, historic character, industrial heritage, creative industries, and public space. Its conservation and adaptive reuse strategies have effectively balanced heritage preservation with contemporary development, positioning the cluster as a vital actor in urban regeneration and environmental sustainable development. M50 offers high-quality leisure and cultural facilities, enhancing the city's appeal while serving as a

highlight of Shanghai's industrial tourism. It exemplifies the cultural potential of industrial heritage reuse and contributes to broader public education and cross-cultural exchange. The 2019 Putuo District Practice-Based Exhibition, part of the Shanghai Urban Space Art Season, designated M50 as its primary venue under the theme 'From Riverside Edges to a Vibrant Putuo – Culture Illuminates Suzhou Creek'. The exhibition positioned the M50 Creative Park as a representative case of urban regeneration along the Suzhou Creek waterfront in Putuo District. Through the artistic interpretation of public space, it showcased the broader transformation of the district's 21-kilometre riverfront and traced the development trajectory of M50 itself (Zhang 2019). Centred around the themes of historical continuity, urban vitality, and brand identity, the exhibition established a multidimensional platform for dialogue connecting culture, quality of life, and community engagement.

4. Discussion

This final section engages in a discussion that integrates the empirical with conceptual. It explores the pathways and challenges of achieving multidimensional sustainability for cultural creative clusters situated in industrial heritage contexts, across four key dimensions: economic, cultural, social, and environmental. Based on the case study, this paper identifies the detail of the core variables influencing the sustainable development of cultural creative clusters. We can then put forward strategic recommendations to support the ongoing evolution of clusters in general, (if specifically clusters emerging from industrial heritage).

4.1 Economy Sustainability

The developmental trajectory of M50 demonstrates that the economic sustainability of creative clusters depends not only on site renovation and rental income, but more crucially on the establishment of a multi-layered and dynamically evolving profit model. In the initial stages, the unique architectural space and historical value of the industrial heritage site did attract artists and creative enterprises, while affordable rent became a vital mechanism for

stimulating creative vitality. This operational model — based on the provision of space coupled with low rent — laid the foundation for the cluster's early cultural ecology.

However, relying solely on rental income to sustain operations can lead to a path-dependent model of over-commercialisation. As Zheng (2011) points out, some creative clusters gradually evolved into 'real estate projects', marginalising their cultural and innovative functions. In contrast, M50 adopted a different developmental strategy. Firstly, the cluster introduced a 'tiered rental mechanism' to protect the interests of early-stage artists, while implementing market-based pricing for commercial tenants, thus achieving a dynamic balance in its rental structure. Secondly, M50 actively promoted a transition from a 'space-rental' model to one of 'branded operation', developing a diversified revenue structure that includes art exhibitions, cultural services, creative consultancy. This transformation effectively avoided reducing the cluster to a single-purpose property venture and instead enhanced its economic resilience and cultural depth.

Furthermore, in the face of emerging competitors (such as the West Bund Art District) and unforeseen risks (such as COVID-19), M50 enhanced public engagement and market visibility through branded initiatives such as 'M50 Art Week'. These efforts not only created broader scope for cultural experience but expanded sources of income — including ticket sales, venue rentals, and derivative product sales — thus establishing an 'experience economy' model within the cluster. This again underscores the point that the sustainable development of creative clusters must go beyond mere spatial provision, and shift towards an operational model driven by cultural content, brand development, and hybrid consumption.

To ensure the economic sustainability of creative clusters of industrial heritage, it would be recommended that a clear cultural development-orientation be established at the initial stage of site renovation. In the later stages of operation, specialised management bodies with characteristics specific to the cluster, should be

introduced to guide the profit model towards greater branding, service diversification, and multi-stream revenue. At the same time, it is essential to be cautious of the tendency towards templated management models, and to avoid the uncritical replication of 'successful cases' without considering the distinctiveness of the local cultural ecology.

4.2 Cultural Sustainability

Internal Cultural Sustainability of the Cluster: Focusing on Creative Essence and Talent Incubation

The M50 case evidences creative clustering as dependent on sustaining a creativity-focused perspective, promoting novel production, and developing a long-term artistic talent ecosystem. Firstly, M50 has set cultural thresholds in its enterprise admission systems in a bid to see that newly entrant institutions are aligned with the creative orientation of the cluster. This goes a long way in avoiding the negative effect of too much commercialisation or commodification of the creative environment. Such a strategy echoes Niu et al. (2018), who argued that although the rise of cultural spaces promote the concentration of creative professionals, it may also lead to a decline in originality if not properly guided. In response, M50 imposes restrictions on shop types and merchandise categories, reinforcing a selection mechanism grounded in creative orientation and thus preserving the cultural integrity of the cluster. Moreover, the M50 case highlights a critical challenge under the objective of cultural sustainability — namely, how to strike a balance between 'forward-looking cultural innovation' and 'respectful expression of industrial memory'. Artistic practices and events in the cluster predominantly adopt a trend-driven and interactive experience format. This form of 'consumable nostalgia' risks obscuring the multi-layered historicity of socialist industrial heritage and diminishing its symbolic representation of collective labour values. Hence, it should be recommended that future curatorial practices and public education efforts enhance the representation of workers' culture, institutional history, and lived production experiences, thereby promoting plural expressions of cultural memory

and avoiding the flattening and commercialisation of cultural identity.

More importantly, M50 places strong focus on the development of artistic talent. It has maintained pioneering-stage artist studios through diversified leasing strategies and set up supporting programs like the 'Creative M50' initiative that continuously looks for new artists and provides incubation conditions for them. Through this, not only does it improve the cluster's artistic innovation, but also transmits cultural capital between generations, thus creating a solid basis for cultural production. By combining spatial planning and institutional arrangements, M50 has made creativity the driving power for the cluster. Moreover, the last few years have seen the rise of new-generation hybrid art institutions in M50 — new-style galleries that are both exhibition spaces, social spaces, and platforms for the creation of artifacts. They infuse increased interactivity and youthful vigor into the cultural vibrancy of the cluster. They also symbolise a further development in cultural ecology, from old models of 'art display' to new types of 'art as lived experience + social interaction', creating new impetus for inner cultural revitalisation of the cluster.

It is also interesting to observe that just as M50 is characterised as a symbolic site of 'free creativity', there are still censorship mechanisms visible in its real practice. Through field interviews, it was found that cultural inspection officers had, on certain occasions, secretly reviewed the content of artwork. This institutionalised ideological control partly restricts the cluster's ability to examine multifaceted expressions of historical memory, social problems, and identity politics. It reminds us that there is tension in 'cultural freedom' and in 'policy boundaries'. Cultural sustainability is not just a matter of sustaining the usage of physical material or economic survival, but also involves the open-ended reproduction of rights to expression, memory, and historical complexity.

*External Cultural Sustainability of the Cluster:
Building a cultural brand and urban influence*

M50 has not only established an internal cultural ecology within the cluster but has actively expanded its external dimension of cultural

dissemination. Through the integration of branding and tourist-oriented mechanisms, it has reinforced its function as a cultural landmark within the urban context. As a national model for industrial tourism and a leading example of a cultural creative cluster, M50 has leveraged its industrial heritage renovation features and the backdrop of Shanghai's Haipai culture to become a key window for the city's cultural outreach. As Landry and Bianchini (1995) suggested many years ago, creative clusters possess strategic potential to enhance a city's soft power and global image — an idea that M50's developmental trajectory embodies. Through initiatives such as art seasons, international art festivals, and youth markets, M50 has increased public participation and also constructed a highly open cultural platform, thereby extending the cluster's role from an 'art production base' to a 'cultural consumption site' and an 'urban social space'. However, as the case analysis indicated, when urban marketing and tourism are excessive, the cluster risks falling into the traps of 'visual symbolisation' and 'spectacular consumption', drifting away from the essence of creativity. In response to this, M50 has sought to strengthen the cultural substance of its brand by deepening the interconnection of artistic practice and the city's historical and cultural values. For instance, its promotional narratives emphasise themes such as 'a microcosm of reform and opening-up' and 'a symbol of Shanghai's culture', aiming to transform artistic spaces into spaces of cultural identification. This strategy, to a certain extent, addresses critiques of 'creative alienation' and offers a relatively successful pathway for aligning external dissemination of the cluster with the deep integration of local cultural heritage.

In summary, M50's cultural sustainability rests on three strategic means: first, an internal framework that upholds artistic orientation and talent cultivation; second, an operational framework that enhances the governance capacity of the creative ecosystem; and third, an external framework that promotes the city's cultural image through brand dissemination. Caution must be exercised regarding the risks of 'cultural commodification', which may compromise the essence of creativity in favour of attracting

tourism. For clusters to achieve cultural sustainability for the future, attention must be paid to the deeper generative means of cultural value rather than adopting development strategies driven solely by visual symbolisation and spatial commodification.

4.3 Social Sustainability

Internal Social Sustainability of the Cluster: Platform Building and Mechanisms for Community Integration

One of the core practices through which M50 promotes social sustainability is the construction of internal platforms; these serve the implementation of resource-sharing mechanisms, which in turn foster inter-firm collaboration and community integration. Initiatives such as the 'Fashion Market' and 'Joint Openings' not only provide sales and exhibition platforms for businesses within the cluster, but also encourage inter-enterprise cooperation — such as the integration of photography, wedding, and design services — establishing a collaborative ecosystem oriented towards service-chain synergies. This platform-based operational model enhances the survival capacity of small creative enterprises and contributes to the formation of a more tightly-knit social interaction network within the cluster.

However, by and large, existing academic research on clusters tends to focus on the social networks among creative professionals (Tsang and Siu 2016; O'Connor and Gu 2014), overlooking the everyday interactions between ordinary residents and commercial tenants within the cluster. In creative clusters grounded in industrial heritage and characterised by 'mixed-use' features, the relationship between businesses and local residents constitutes a key element of social sustainability. Although M50 does not directly incorporate the residential, its social practices offer useful insights. In future developments of clusters that integrate commercial and residential uses, clear spatial and temporal boundaries for commercial activities should be defined at the planning stage in order to prevent potential conflicts related to noise, foot traffic, or overcrowding. Furthermore, innovative commercial models could be considered — such as 'residential equity participation' or 'joint

provision of lifestyle services' — to moderately align the interests of residents with the development of the cluster. Such mechanisms may help foster a more cooperative social framework and promote positive forms of community engagement.

External Social Sustainability of the Cluster: Expanding the Boundaries of Art Popularisation and Public Participation

M50 has also advanced the outreach of art beyond the professional sphere through a series of public-oriented art education and everyday aesthetics programmes, facilitating communication and interaction between creative production and wider social groups. For example, initiatives such as 'Everyday Aesthetics' courses, the 'Nongtang Project', and youth-oriented art education programmes have not only enhanced citizens' perceptiveness of art but also fostered emotional connections and creative exchanges between artists and community residents. These efforts have broken the often-criticised 'elite cultural loop' of the creative industries, allowing art to gradually permeate everyday urban life and enhancing the overall cultural inclusivity of society.

It is important to note that past literature (Boyle 1997; Zukin 1995) has tended to highlight how creative clusters intensify class stratification and exclude indigenous and marginalised groups from cultural participation due to their relative spatial and cultural detachment. Although M50 has achieved a degree of openness through its cultural initiatives, it still faces challenges in terms of spatial segregation and cognitive disconnection. Therefore, the mere inclusion of participatory programmes is insufficient; cultural creative clusters must be supported by institutional mechanisms that genuinely bridge the divide between creative elites and the general public. Looking ahead, for M50 to continue expanding its social impact, a more tiered and diversified system of activities should be promoted — one that retains spaces for improvisational and experimental creativity while also establishing experiential and participatory cultural spaces for the general public. In this way, a cultural field shared across social strata can be meaningfully constructed.

Yet, the social sustainability of cultural creative clusters lies not only in offering diversified forms of cultural participation, but also in enabling different social groups to express their own memories and identities. M50's current symbolic appropriation of socialist industrial memory may contribute to shaping its cultural brand, but it also risks rendering certain social groups — such as former industrial workers and indigenous residents — 'voiceless' within the space of identity. It is therefore recommended that future cluster projects incorporate oral history, and intergenerational dialogue to build cultural platforms that foster cross-class and cross-memory communities, enabling creative spaces to function as arenas for the negotiated production of urban memory.

In summary, M50 has established a multidimensional strategy for social sustainability through platform coordination, community engagement, and arts education, demonstrating the potential of cultural creative clusters to connect across social strata. Nonetheless, the challenges it faces must not be overlooked: how can the cultural rights of diverse social groups be safeguarded in the pursuit of industrial efficiency and spatial upgrading? How can we avoid the stratification, touristification, and spectacularisation of cultural space?

Accordingly, the future development of cultural creative clusters must move beyond a narrow logic of artistic production and adopt a space governance perspective centred on social embeddedness. This entails constructing a social system — through spatial configuration, activity mechanisms, and organisational structures — that fosters public participation, community co-governance, and shared resources. Such an approach not only enhances the cluster's own resilience but also enables it to become a leading platform for urban social integration and the practice of cultural democracy.

4.4 Environment

From the perspective of environmental sustainability, as observed in the case analysis, M50 has not only achieved spatial regeneration through the protective renovation of its historic

buildings, it has played a significant role as a regional driver within the urban governance framework of the Suzhou Creek waterfront. Existing studies have shown that the transformation of industrial heritage into creative clusters often leads to the overall enhancement of surrounding infrastructure and ecological environments. Such impacts are not limited to physical improvements but are embedded within a broader urban renewal system that, through city planning frameworks, intersects cultural, ecological, and social dimensions.

M50's role in the transformation of surrounding areas, extend to what is called cultural 'spillover effects'. For example, the gradual emergence of the 'Shanghai Music Valley' along the Suzhou Creek can be seen as a spatial extension of the creative agglomeration mechanism initiated by M50. This culture-driven model of regeneration through the knowledge and skills of production, learning and performance or events, has revitalised formerly declining industrial waterfront spaces and facilitated the formation of a cross-regional artistic ecosystem.

In addition, M50 has positively influenced the redefinition of environmental value of the natural environment. Being a flagship industrial heritage reuse site along Suzhou Creek, its redevelopment is characterized by a combination of cultural conservation and city revitalisation. Through the preservation of the historic facades of old buildings and the addition of creative and artistic functions, the concept of 'minimal intervention and functional reconstruction' is embodied by M50. By avoiding superficial cultural tokenism, this also presents a valuable model of ecological revitalisation and spatial regulation along city waterfronts. Through the reform of the rationale of public spaces, it has produced high-quality spaces for entertainment and interaction for residents and visitors alike. The renewal of the site as an 'urban art landmark' has facilitated the upgrade of cultural tourism and public education and ranks as a top attribute in the branding of 'industrial tourism in Shanghai'. The 2019 'M50 Practice Exhibition', with its thematic orientation of city waterfronts, artistic incubation, and cultural forums, demonstrated the symbiosis of

‘historic character – urban vitality – cultural branding’, further solidifying the place of M50 in city natural ecological revitalisation.

Therefore, in terms of environmental sustainability, M50, as a representative of industrial heritage-based cultural creative clusters, exemplifies a full-spectrum value chain — ranging from internal spatial conservation to external ecological dissemination. It reactivates industrial history through micro-renewal methods and extends the use value of urban natural spaces through cultural stimulation mechanisms. For future environmentally sustainable development of industrial heritage, it is essential not only to preserve the physical fabric of space but also to sustain the memory embedded within cultural spaces. It is thus recommended that industrial heritage be regarded as a carrier of social and historical continuity, emphasising the reproduction of its core values — industrial spirit, labour culture, and collective memory — so as to avoid falling into the trap of superficial or ‘skin-deep’ conservation.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Research Findings: The Multidimensional Sustainability Logic of Industrial Heritage Clusters

Using the M50 as a case, this research explores how industrial heritage, through its architectural features, cultural connotations, and institutional governance, can drive the sustainable development of cultural creative heritage clusters. The findings indicate that industrial heritage spaces attract creative talent and enterprise not only because of their distinctive physical form, but also through the continuity of historical environment, which in turn fosters cultural identity and spatial belonging within the cluster. This cultural embeddedness provides robust support across both economic and social dimensions. Simultaneously, the cluster’s cultural and environmental spillover effects contribute significantly to regional cultural regeneration and the enhancement of public space quality.

Moreover, the case reveals that the sustainability of creative clusters is not static, but highly dependent on the adaptability of their governance

mechanisms. M50 has undergone a transformation from a ‘space provider’ to a ‘cultural operator’, reflecting an institutional evolution in response to changing external environments, expanding social demands, and the need for brand reinvention. It is through the interweaving of spatial renewal, cultural integration, and social participation that industrial heritage acquires new urban meanings and achieves multidimensional sustainability. Furthermore, the evolution of M50 suggests that industrial heritage-based cultural creative clusters are not merely ‘reproduction spaces’ of history, but dynamic arenas for memory selection, cultural expression and identity construction. A central challenge for their future lies in how to preserve socialist industrial memory while avoiding its selective commercial appropriation and reduction to ‘visualised nostalgia’.

5.2 Research Contributions and Limitations: From Spatial Regeneration to the Politics of Memory

This article positions industrial heritage as a core variable in the sustainable development of cultural creative clusters, aiming to extend the theoretical boundaries of the field of cultural policy research. In particular, it introduces new analytical perspectives on cultural heritage memory, identity construction, and urban innovation. Through the M50 case, the research demonstrates the multifaceted value of industrial heritage spaces in the context of China’s urban transformation: as economic assets, cultural symbols, and historical witnesses, constantly reshaped through the interplay of policy incentives and market logic.

Nonetheless, certain limitations remain. The single-case approach presents contextual constraints and makes it difficult to establish a broadly generalisable framework; it also lacks deeper empirical support regarding the ways in which different generations, social classes, and groups perceive and respond to and experience industrial heritage spaces. Additionally, the discursive negotiations among local governments, developers, and artistic communities in the ‘selection of history’ merit further investigation in future research.

5.3 Future Research Directions: From Sustainable Space to Cultural Subjectivity

As post-industrial cities enter a 'culture-driven' phase, industrial heritage spaces are increasingly transformed into urban nodes rich in affective, symbolic, and cultural capital. Silver and Clark (2016) argue that a city's cultural appeal increasingly relies on those intangible 'comfort amenities' and aesthetic terrain. Future research could further explore how industrial heritage can be converted into creative spaces characterised by emotional attachment and aesthetic resonance — rather than merely serving as stylish or fashionable urban backdrop.

In addition, attention should be paid to how industrial heritage site-planning can navigate a dynamic balance between national memory and local identity. Do cultural creative clusters genuinely serve as platforms for the expression of historical memory, or do they become sites of symbolic consumption under dominant narratives? In light of China's current 14th Five-Year Plan, which emphasises both cultural and ecological development, industrial heritage-based creative clusters could assume greater responsibilities in the public cultural sphere, transitioning from physical spatial regeneration to the reconstruction of cultural subjectivity. This shift not only opens up new methodological possibilities for industrial heritage research, but also offers valuable insights for the ongoing transformation of urban governance.

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