

Justin, Catharine Marshall, Rossi
Northumbria University, Kingston University London

Reflections on the development and multiple aspirations of Shenzhen's makers in the context of a global maker movement.

In early 2015 the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Chaihuo, a makerspace in Shenzhen, the city responsible for producing ninety per cent of the world's personal computers and seventy per cent of its mobile phones.[1] The visit expressed the significance of China's fledgling but fast-growing maker movement: while its first makerspace was only set up in 2010, there are now over a hundred, and Keqiang's visit is part of a bigger governmental push on makerspaces, positioned as sites of technology-led innovation key to the country's economic growth.

Investigating the Sino maker movement was the focus an intensive two week UK visit to China in 2015, 'Living Research: Making in China', followed by a three-month AHRC/Newton Fund research and networking project in 2016, 'China's Creative Communities: Making Value and the Value(s) of Making'. The outcomes of these initial scoping projects have been used to inform a series of British Council instigated exchanges between the maker communities in the UK and Shenzhen through the residency programme 'Hello Shenzhen' in 2017. This focused on a range of themes, including: sustainability, education, community development and enterprise. This flurry of on-the-ground research and associated practice based activities has resulted in both new networks across UK and Shenzhen maker 'communities' and an appreciation of the debates, tensions and aspirations within the diversity of organisations and businesses in Shenzhen that align themselves to the maker movement.

Drawing on the first hand experience of the authors and the reflections of other UK and Chinese participants in the above projects, this presentation considers the landscape of makerspaces in Shenzhen and reflects on the disjuncture between the realities and the rhetoric of government policy concerning the scale and nature of maker spaces and communities. Recognising that the maker movement is a globally distributed phenomenon shaped by local contexts, the presentation will highlight the role of cultural specificity in understanding the multiple meanings and roles of the growing international maker community and ways in which the academic research community can positively engage in these debates. For example, in Europe maker culture includes a radicalist impulse that challenges globalist production and consumerism. In contrast, many US makerspaces have hobbyist and educational emphases. China is different again, with a strong government backed commercial innovation agenda. However, these are generalisations and this paper will conclude with a reflection on the breaking down of culturally specific beliefs and assumptions and highlight interesting new examples and identify future opportunities for collaborations that transcend the expectations (from both parties) about the skills and aspirations of UK and Chinese makers.

[1] Tom Saunders and Jeremy Kingsley, (2016) Made in China: Makerspaces and the Search for Mass Innovation. NESTA. p.5. Retrieved from:
<http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/made-china-makerspaces-and-search-mass-innovation#sthash.Mb6gXRB9.dpuf>