

**CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA:
THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN POLITICAL DOGMATISM AND
ECONOMIC PRAGMATISM**

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Abstract: Many consider ideology to be obsolete in contemporary China. By taking a case study on cultural production in China, this article argues that ideology still plays a symbolic, yet crucial role in influencing Chinese politics. This article shows how China's cultural production, in particular, TV industry has been struggling between political dogmatism and economic pragmatism. By using the six-facet cultural production model as a theoretical framework to study China's TV industry, this article provides a notable addition to understanding the role of ideology and the development of the cultural industry in contemporary China.

Keywords: Chinese politics, cultural industry, cultural production, political ideology

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**1. Introduction: the coexistence of commercialisation and politicisation
in the Chinese cultural industry**

China's spectacular economic growth over the past thirty years suggests that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has got its market reforms right. It has also prompted a plethora of political science and economics research linking this economic miracle with the CCP's ruling basis. A key hypothesis is that the CCP now stakes the continuation of its rule on economic performance, thereby rendering the ideology of communism obsolete in contemporary China (Dreyer 2012, Lynch 1999, Misra 1998, Ramo 2004). As Holbig (2013:61) points out,

In the political science literature on contemporary China, ideology is mostly regarded as a dogmatic straitjacket to market reforms that has been worn out over the years of economic success, an obsolete legacy of the past waiting to be cast off in the course of the country's transition toward capitalism.

While such views may seem reasonable in the view of the declining importance of communist thought in China, the existing studies underestimate the importance of ideology to the Communist Party. In this article, it is argued that ideology still plays a crucial role in influencing Chinese politics. Using a case study on cultural production in China, the article shows how China's cultural industry, the television industry in particular, is forced to straddle between political dogmatism and economic pragmatism. Peterson and Anand's (2004) six-factor model of cultural production is used as a theoretical framework to study the unique characteristics of China's television industry. This article provides a notable addition to the literature on the role of ideology and the development of the cultural industry in contemporary China.

In recent years, cultural industry has become increasingly important in China due to the CCP's ambitions to maintain pro-authoritarian values domestically and to build soft power on the international stage, such as through the proliferation of Confucius Institutes. On 18 October 2011, the sixth plenary meeting of the 17th CCP Central Committee passed a resolution on the structural reform of the Chinese cultural sector. Similar to previous economic reforms in other sectors, the CCP set a number of objectives for the cultural sector, including 'to become a pillar sector of the national economy, with overall strength and enhanced international competitiveness', 'to be based on collective ownership, coupled with other forms of ownerships', 'to unify social and economic values, with the former as the priority' and 'to render the cultural sector into an economic engine, contributing to the overall economic structural readjustment and more sustainable development' (CCP 2011). Notably, the CCP also officially adopted the strategy of 'national revitalisation through culture' (*wenhua xingguo*). This strategy is seen as a further step in the revitalisation of China, as it provides an important link between the economic reforms and China's opening up policy (Tian 2012).

The degree to which cultural production and the cultural industries have been prioritised as a national strategy in China is rarely witnessed in other countries today. In fact, the Chinese government has been striving to promote the cultural sector since as early as the 1980s, when the cultural market began to emerge out of the declining rigid state command economy (Keane 2000:245–7). Since 2000, the Chinese government has paid even more attention to the cultural sector, implementing a consistent series of blueprints and regulations, such as the 2003 'decision on the reform of the cultural sector', the 2009 'development plan of the cultural industries' and a 2010 policy paper 'promoting the cultural industries as a pillar sector of the national economy'.

In recent years, the government's efforts have paid off, as the cultural industry in China has seen some remarkable achievements. According to the official statistics, since 2004, the Chinese cultural industry has registered an annual growth rate of 23%. In 2010, the turnover of the cultural industry amounted to RMB 1,100 billion, accounting for 2.78% of the total GDP. In some provinces and municipalities, the cultural industry has become a pillar sector in the regional economy, accounting for as much as 5% of total regional GDP (CCP, 2011). The

industry continues to develop at an enviable pace, with the total turnover of the Chinese cultural sector increasing to RMB 4,000 billion in 2012 (Zhang, Wang and Zhang 2013).

Nonetheless, in his report to the National People's Congress in April 2010, the Chinese Minister of Culture, Wu Cai, admitted that the Chinese cultural industry still had a number of shortcomings, weaknesses and problems. The most acute difficulties were reported to include a lack of leading cultural enterprises with sufficient national and international competitiveness and reputation; a lack of professionals with expertise and competence in the cultural industry; persistent trade deficits in cultural products; and strong competition between the regions and provinces leading to the production of similar cultural projects without much creativity. To the observers of Chinese cultural industry, the sector does exhibit some interesting, yet puzzling characteristics. While there is steady growth in the level of cultural production, the sector lacks creative innovation. Furthermore, China's cultural products are mostly consumed in the domestic market and the vast majority are little known outside the country. More fundamentally, the cultural sector is marked by a strange combination of commercialisation and politicisation. Although the cultural sector in China is highly commercialised, as is the case in most other market economies, it is still heavily politicised, as cultural products are constantly used to remind the populace that they are still living in a communist country.

The case of the Chinese cultural industry thus presents a challenge to analysts who are generally puzzled by the cultural sector's progress, problems and paradoxes. Around a decade ago, a veteran analyst of the Chinese cultural industry proposed a research agenda consisting of a number of key questions on the topic (Keane 2000). The questions touch upon different key issues and characteristics of the cultural sector in China, such as the government regulation of cultural production, the relationship between autonomy and funding, the economic and political implications of commercialisation, decentralisation and privatisation, the government's political use of culture and its tolerance of cultural expression, and the sector's relationships with foreign cultures. Some of these issues are more technical, in that they relate to the nature of cultural production, while the others focus on more fundamental issues concerning the sector. Even so, these different issues are connected by a number of fundamental factors. In particular, the characteristics of the Chinese cultural sector, including most of its problems, can only be explained in relation to the status of the current Chinese political regime and its hybrid model of political economy, which combines modern mercantilism and communist rule.

This article analyses how cultural production and the cultural industry in China are subject to strong political and economic forces, focusing in particular on how the government's joint efforts in promoting political dogmatism and economic pragmatism have endowed the sector with some unique Chinese characteristics. The next section elaborates an analytical framework of cultural production in the context of post-totalitarian China. The framework is then applied to a case study of

television drama production in China. Finally, the results of the case study are discussed in relation to the broader Chinese cultural sector.

2. Cultural production in post-totalitarian China

To understand a country's cultural production, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the social context of that country simply because the latter provides the framework for the former. However, defining the current political system in China is difficult, even for the most sophisticated China scholars. For one, the China of today is far from Mao's totalitarian regime. Nonetheless, the current Chinese system appears to be Janus-faced, with a dynamic market economy functioning as a result of the bold economic reform and opening up policies, while the Communist Party stubbornly continues to rule. This situation is officially labelled by the Chinese government as socialism with Chinese characteristics, whilst some analysts ironically define it as capitalism with Chinese characteristics (Montinola et al., 1995).

Indeed, the current Chinese system can be described as a hybrid of modern mercantilist economics and rigid Communist Party rule. Overall, the current situation in China can be compared to an ideal type of post-totalitarian regime in terms of the major dimensions of pluralism, ideology, mobilisation and leadership (Linz and Stepan 2004:157–8). The noticeable social and economic pluralism that some Chinese people currently enjoy was unimaginable three decades ago. There may also be a degree of institutional pluralism, although it is only available to members of the nomenklatura or the so-called *Tizhinei* (people within the system). However, political pluralism is essentially absent as power is still solely under the firm control of the Party.

Since the late 1970s, the CCP has shifted from an ideological ruling strategy towards a form of governance that is based on performance, especially economic performance. Today, the CCP focuses more on achieving realistic and pragmatic goals in raising socio-economic standards. Thus, many argue that the traditional communist ideology has become obsolete. However, according to the CCP constitution (CCP 2013), the 'highest ideal and the ultimate goal' of the Party, and theoretically the only reason for its existence, is to achieve communism (Zeng 2014). This seems to contradict the Party's plans to establish a capitalist society and, indeed, the suggestion in the mainstream literature that the creation of a form of capitalism is key for the CCP to stay in power. Thus, a crucial task for the CCP is to explain why China still needs a monopoly communist party. To justify if not legitimatise its rule, the CCP continues to place high value on the communist doctrines, at least symbolically.

According to the official party line, the socialist market economy is an innovative development of Marxism in the twenty-first century. However, investigation of the substantive policies and measures shows that the current economy is no different from the prevailing model of political economy, which is

simply a contemporary incarnation of mercantilism. Modern mercantilism is a modification of the classical version in that it strikes a balance between the market and the state, self-reliance and economic interdependence, and political dogmatism and economic pragmatism (Jackson and Sorensen 2007:208). This political and economic logic applies to the current post-totalitarian Chinese state, where the market has been incorporated into the political context. The Chinese cultural industry currently operates in this broad political and economic context.

Peterson and Anand (2004) propose a six-factor model of cultural production that comprises the six dimensions of technology, law and regulation, industry structure, organisational structure, occupational careers and the market. This model is helpful as it enables cultural production, the cultural industry and cultural consumption to be analysed in a more systematic way. However, the model needs some improvement or clarification to be applicable to the Chinese context. The most obvious problem is that all six factors are treated as different facets of the same process. Furthermore, the model assumes that cultural production takes place in a democratic, properly functioning liberal market economy. Therefore, some modification is required before the model is applicable to the Chinese context.

First, the six dimensions need to be differentiated according to their respective roles in cultural production. The first two dimensions, law and regulation and technology, are determining factors in the cultural industry, as they have direct and significant effects on how the sector functions. For example, laws and regulations, which create the ground rules shaping how creative fields develop (Peterson and Anand 2004:315), play a particularly decisive role in structuring the cultural sector in post-totalitarian China. Moreover, as is the case in other economies, technological changes both profoundly destabilise and create new opportunities in art and culture. The remaining dimensions can be distinguished in relation to production and consumption. Production itself can be further divided into three levels of cultural production: the industry structure at the macro level, which refers to the patterns of the specific industry; the organisational structure at the meso level, which concerns individual cultural enterprises; and occupational careers at the micro level, which concern the career systems and networks of working relationships of cultural professionals and artists. Finally, cultural markets refer to the contexts in which cultural producers and consumers interact in constructing cultural tastes.

3. The case of television drama production

The Chinese cultural sector is highly regulated and operates within the huge, complicated and yet well-defined hierarchical structure of the Chinese post-totalitarian regime. At the top of the system, the Propaganda Department of the CCP guides and oversees the country's general cultural activities. The Chinese Ministry of Culture and the State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and TV are the two major government agencies in charge of the

operations of the respective domains of the cultural industry. This hierarchical system covers the central, provincial and local governmental levels. Despite the marketization of the Chinese cultural industry, the various levels of the CCP's Propaganda Department always have the final say. This is also the political context in which the Chinese television industry is located. As a major cultural industry, the television industry is highly commercialised. However, at the same time, it is also part of the mass media and is officially referred to as the 'mouthpiece of the Party'. Therefore, the television industry in China is typical of Chinese cultural production in general in that it operates according to the dual logic of political dogmatism and economic pragmatism.

Technology and law and regulation are the two major structural dimensions influencing the production of cultural products, such as television drama, in China. The rapid development of television drama production and the television industry as a whole has benefited greatly from technological factors, particularly the technological advancement in production and broadcast media. The lower cost of television production and broadcast equipment, the construction of cable TV networks and the emergence of satellite TV channels have brought about a revolution in the television industry in China. At the same time, numerous professionals have joined the television industry and audiences now have access to a wide selection of television programmes from all parts of the country. This trend is continuing, as new technologies such as online media and digitalised equipment further destabilise the traditional constraints to broadcasting.

While technological change has created opportunities for television in China, laws and regulations have had a disciplinary effect on the industry. For instance, the commercialisation of the television industry began immediately after the implementation of the reform policy. There have also been significant changes in the production of television drama in recent years. Initially, various units of the government, such as the state television stations, the press, some ministries and the military, were the only institutions permitted to produce television products. However, at the end of the 1980s, the Chinese government relaxed this policy by adopting a permit system (Yang, et al. 2010:13), which triggered the emergence of private production companies for film and television. In addition, the government was initially the sole source of funding. Later television was sponsored by enterprises and commercial investment was then introduced. Today, the television industry is substantially reliant on the revenue from copyright and advertising. As a result, drama has become the most important product and main source of income for the Chinese television industry. The production of television drama in China has grown significantly from 19 episodes in 1979 to 14,498 in 2008. China is now the largest producer of television drama in the world, with 436 plays and 14,700 episodes produced in 2010 (Zhang and Zhang 2011).

Nevertheless, the television industry is still highly regulated and is governed by a strict censorship system. The 'Regulations on the Management of the Content of TV Dramas' stipulate that the government has the power to censor the production, distribution and broadcasting of television drama according to the principles of 'to

serve the people and the socialist direction', 'to stick to social benefits first, together with economic benefits' and 'to ensure the correct direction of art' (CCP 2010). As such, regulation provides the ground rules for the production of television drama in China.

Although they signify different economic categories, industry structure, organisational structure and occupational careers all relate to the production dimension of the cultural industry. In other words, while the categories are analytically separate, they are inseparable in reality, as the three factors are closely intertwined. At the macro level, a complete industrial chain now exists for television drama products, extending from production to distribution and broadcasting. Initially, the producing departments of the various television stations were the major producers of television dramas. The best known station is the China TV Drama Production Centre, which is affiliated with the China Central TV Station. However, China TV has been losing market share to the burgeoning privately funded film and television producing companies. Overall, the structure of the Chinese television industry conforms more to the first industrial pattern in the six facet model, in which 'there may be many small competing firms producing a diversity of products' (Peterson and Anand 2004: 316). Distribution is carried out either by the producers themselves or by specialised distribution companies. Finally, the television broadcasters are the main purchasers of television dramas. The broadcasters are in an advantageous position in relation to the highly diversified production sector and usually play an active role in affairs relating to production.

Because of the hybrid nature of television drama productions, all three types of organisational structure (Peterson and Anand 2004:317) coexist in the Chinese television drama industry: the television drama production centres affiliated with the state-owned TV stations and other government units usually adopt the bureaucratic form, the privately funded companies adopt the entrepreneurial form, while the more market oriented governmental producers adopt a variegated organisational structure. Perhaps as a consequence, the television industry also provides a mixture of 'top down' and 'bottom up' possibilities in terms of occupational career (Peterson and Anand 2004). As the television drama industry is now considerably dependent on the market, fierce market competition usually decides career development in the sector. As a result, career paths are often 'chaotic', with successful 'entrepreneurs' and artists (writers, directors, actors, etc.) arising from the 'bottom up'. For example, writing for television has become very professionalised, with around 500 writers now accounting for most of the television dramas in China (Zhang, Bai and Pan 2013:43–44). Nonetheless, 'an institutional pattern of predictable careers' can still be readily observed in this highly regulated sector, particularly in the state-owned organisations. Moreover, many of the entrepreneurs and artists in the industry are also official members of the regime. For example, a director or an actress may also be a military officer because of his or her organisational affiliation with the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Although the market is the recipient end of the cultural industry, it is not passively receptive. On the contrary, it is usually the most powerful link. This is particularly the case in China, where all television channels are part of the government at some level. However, competition does exist through the marketing of television productions, in which audience ratings play a big role. This usually takes place when several television stations tender for the first episode of a popular television drama. While economics plays an important role in this process, the logic of politics is also evident. The media in China, including the television industry, are always the 'mouthpiece' of the Party. Accordingly, all of the television stations in China have a political obligation to devote resources to distributing propaganda, usually following the guidance of the CCP's Propaganda Department. As a result, many different types of television drama are produced and broadcast for propaganda purposes. Although a certain amount of resources is devoted to so-called 'mainstream' television, the dramas that do not pass the content censorship are banned immediately, no matter how much has been invested in their production.

What does this mean for the audiences? The relationship between audience taste and television drama production in China is complicated. While producers can shape audience tastes, the reverse is also true. However, given the highly regulated television production industry in China, the two sides have a narrow range of themes and topics from which to select. As a result, Chinese television dramas tend to be intensely focused around specific themes and genres, such as contemporary soap operas, revolutionary events, figures in the CCP's road to power and adaptations of classic Chinese novels. An interesting phenomenon has been the emergence and popularity of the so-called 'wonder drama' (Shenju) and 'weird drama' (Leiju) genres. The 'wonder dramas' depict stories in which an almost invincible hero, usually a Party member, fights the enemies in the war with Japan or during the Chinese civil war. The 'weird dramas' depict unrealistic stories, which are usually set in ancient times. Although these types of television drama have made impressive economic returns, many critics believe that these superficial dramas reflect the low tastes of the Chinese television producers and their audience.

4. Cultural industries with Chinese characteristics

China's post-totalitarian society is unique in that it contains a number of seemingly contradictory traits. For example, in terms of political economy, the state and the market are both dynamic forces; in terms of political ideology, political dogmatism coexists with economic pragmatism; and, in terms of the country's external policies, self-reliance and economic interdependence are both upheld. Accordingly, cultural production and the cultural industry in China are also endowed with these special characteristics.

The compromise between the state and the market has had a direct effect on the cultural sector, which is typically known to produce with little creativity. Market mechanisms have been gradually introduced into the cultural sector over the past three decades. Today, China has a fully-fledged cultural industry, which is confirmed by a range of factors. The economies of scale of the cultural industry have been steadily increasing and the sector is now a noticeable component of the overall Chinese economy. In addition, a number of key cultural enterprises have come into being, which now play a leading role in the sector. New forms of cultural production are also emerging in the digital era. Overall, the cultural industry has become a lucrative sector, which attracts large amounts of investment and other resources (Zhang, Wang and Zhang 2013:23–24). Nonetheless, the state looms behind the market and state regulation is a defining feature of the cultural sector. First, the Chinese government has strong economic incentives to develop the cultural industry and sets annual objectives with measurable targets that are then evaluated against real performance. At the same time, cultural production is still subject to stringent procedures and applying for a production permit remains a typically cumbersome experience. There is also the problem of the fragmentation of the cultural sector, which is regulated by a number of different governmental agencies, according to the type of product. For example, film and television products are regulated by the State Administration of Radio, Film and TV, while performing arts are governed by the Ministry of Culture. Furthermore, the national market is regionally segregated and there is strong competition between different regions in the cultural sector (Song 2013:93). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why the Chinese cultural industry is marked by high levels of production, but also by a low level of creativity.

The compromise between the state and the market reflects the ideological contradiction between political dogmatism and economic pragmatism. Again, this contradiction has consequences for the cultural sector, as it has given rise to the asymmetric development of the cultural and material values in cultural production. Different from most other commodities, cultural products contain both material and cultural values. Successful cultural productions typically take both values into consideration because the two are mutually complementary. A cultural product without material value does not constitute a commodity, while a cultural product without cultural value does not qualify as a ‘cultural’ commodity. However, the cultural industry in China has struggled to create cultural values, while at the same time professionals in the cultural sector are encouraged to increase their economic output. This situation is a direct result of the dual push for economic pragmatism and political dogmatism. In other words, although great efforts have been made to increase the commercialisation of the cultural industry, at the same time, the Chinese government has continued to keep a tight grip on the sector. Economic pragmatism and political dogmatism currently play a significant role in Chinese society, with both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, the government’s economic pragmatism has largely stimulated the Chinese cultural industry, as measured in economic production and revenue. On the negative side, however,

political dogmatism has imposed the stern discipline of ‘political correctness’ on the sector. Among the major cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh 2012:17), the more technical, but less content focused sectors, such as video and computer games, advertising, marketing, public relations and web design, tend to be much more developed. However, the sectors that are substantially reliant on content have developed in an abnormal way, as represented by the emergence of the ‘wonder drama’ and ‘weird drama’ television genres.

The post-totalitarian regime has tried to strike another compromise between self-reliance and economic interdependence. This compromise has had corresponding consequences for the cultural sector, which reflect the gap between China’s self-image and the country’s actual soft power in the rest of the world. In the decades since the opening up policy was first implemented, China has built complex networks with the outside world. The cultural sector has also developed networks through cultural exchanges, such as visiting art performances and the import and export of films, television dramas and other cultural products. This experience has increased the government’s confidence in exporting its cultural products and raising its international influence. In fact, the government plans to use the export of Chinese culture as a soft power strategy for seeking economic and political advantages abroad (Zhang 2010:393–396). However, some serious drawbacks have been experienced with the implementation of the ‘go global’ policy in the cultural sector. For one, Chinese cultural products have to overcome the barrier of cultural difference in foreign exchange. More importantly, cultural products with little cultural value are unlikely to be accepted in the international market.

5. Conclusion: in the shadow of Yan’an

Cultural production in post-totalitarian China is unique in that it is both highly commercialised and constrained by political doctrines and discipline. The tight government control of the sector is reminiscent of traditional communist practice, which can be traced back to age-old legacies. In May 1942, Mao Zedong delivered a number of speeches at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. The northern city of Yan’an was the seat of the CCP’s headquarters from 1936–1948, and the speeches have since become known as the Yan’an Talks. In the talks, Mao states that art should serve ordinary working people and the political purposes of advancing the socialist cause. The Yan’an Talks set the tone for the Party’s policies on the cultural sector and for the country as a whole after the CCP took power in 1949. Although there has been some reevaluation of Mao’s thought, the talks retain the guiding principles of the Chinese cultural cause and the commercialised cultural industry.

In recent years, there has been some debate among liberal-minded people in China about abolishing the Yan’an principles. However, this possibility can be seen to have been largely ruled out in a recent talk by the new Chinese leader, Xi

Jingping, at the National Propaganda and Thoughts Work Conference in August 2013, in which Xi emphasised that ‘while economic construction is the key task, ideological work is extremely important to the Party’ (Xi 2013). Although few people still have faith in the Communist ideology, it is essential for the post-totalitarian regime to pay respect to its legacy to maintain its grip on society. With this in mind, cultural production in China is most likely to continue to bear its unique Chinese characteristics for the next few years to come.

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