Understanding Chinese Cultural Industries through Chinese Opera

Abstract: This paper examines the discourse of Chinese cultural and creative industries (CCI) from the angle of traditional Chinese opera. Contextualized in the case study of Xi’an QinQiang (Qin opera) cultural industries reform, this article articulates the intimate relationship between Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideological evolution and the struggle of Chinese opera market reform. This paper argues that as Chinese opera has been, and still is, a popular cultural form predominantly amongst the peasants and workers, who were the founding base of the CCP, the struggle of the opera market reflects directly the CCP internal turmoil in gaining its own legitimacy. This paper suggests that despite fundamental ideological alteration, reasons for the CCP maintaining sole legal ruling power lie in China’s unique regional-central government structure and the social mediator roles occupied by the artists. The continued negotiation between central (ideology), regional (urbanization) and community (artist) levels, supporting each other for their own survival and legitimacy, forms the structure of China’s latest art market reform, in the name of cultural industries.

Key words: Chinese opera, urbanization, artists, community, cultural industries, ideology, legitimacy

Chinese Opera and Chinese Cultural Industries

On 15th October 2014, after Xi Jinping’s inauguration, the President gave Talks on Arts and Literature at the Beijing People’s Congress. In the Speech, Xi articulated that ‘arts and artists must not lose direction in the wave of market economy, must not be the slave of capital’ and that ‘the future of Chinese cultural industries was to be anchored on traditional art forms’ (China News 2015). After having delivered the Beijing Speech, in December 2014, Xi, along
with all six members of the China Central Standing Committee of the CCP - the most powerful
decision making group in China - attended a Chinese Opera performance in celebration of the
New Year. This extremely rare occasion was broadcast nationally and internationally (Xinhua
Net 2017).

There are two firsts in the above actions. This is the first time since Mao Zedong’s 1942
Yan’an Talks on Arts and Literature that any leading CCP chairman had delivered a speech on
the role of arts and artists, using the same title. Secondly, this is the first time since Mao’s era
that CCP leading members have collectively attended a Chinese opera performance, which has
since been repeated annually to this day. This paper explores the significance of Chinese opera
in relation to CCP ideological evolution, contextualised in the cultural industries reform.

Cultural industries as a discourse first emerged in China in the early 2000s, following
closely the UK policy in 1998 of reviving the post-industrial society through culture and
creativity (DCMS 1998). In 2004, the phrase Creative Economy formally arrived in China
when John Howkins, author of The Creative Economy, inaugurated the School of Creative
Industries at Shanghai Theatre Academy, China. It was not until 2009 that Chinese national
policy adopted the discourse. Between the fluid names of cultural industries, cultural economy,
creative industries and creative economy, China has preferred Cultural and Creative Industries
- CCI (White and Xu 2012). Since the beginning of the 2010s, there has been intensified
nationwide economic reform focused on CCI, with China’s new political and economic
ambition set to make the CCI its pillar economy by 2020. From the beginning of the new
millennium, there has been a rise in research on China’s CCI (Zhang 2017, Ma 2015, White

In Urban Politics and Cultural Capital, the case of Chinese opera (Ma 2015) the author
identifies the link between the struggle of Chinese art market reform in the new millennium
and the CCPs’ struggle in retaining legitimacy. This is because, the author argues, Chinese
opera has been and still is the popular art form amongst peasants and workers. Under Mao, Chinese opera was institutionalised and Chinese artists were provided unprecedented political capital and were made the new elite class. This act ensured that the historically repressed class and their associated art forms gained distinction, which in turn provided the CCP with identified representation and legitimacy. In the post-Mao era, opera institutions are placed under dual pressures of gaining economic success whilst supporting CCP ideological legitimacy. Chinese opera companies are forced to abandon the traditional Chinese opera audience of the peasants and workers, who cannot provide the required economic success and legitimacy, whilst struggling to reach the new middle-class audience and nurture their new taste towards traditional opera. In this process, Chinese opera struggles to articulate its value and representation; such struggle mirrors directly the CCP ideological evolution in articulating its own representation and legitimacy (Ma 2015: 2-10).

This paper expands the above argument to China’s latest art market reform of cultural industries. Contextualized in the case study of Xi’an Qinjiang reform in the early 21st century, this paper argues that Xi Jinping’s inaugurated speech on Arts and Literature, together with the CCP’s leading members collective opera viewing, highlight the urgency of the CCP’s articulation of its representation and legitimacy. This paper suggests that despite fundamental alteration of CCP ideological representation, the reason for the CCP retaining legitimacy lies in the unique regional-central government structure and the social mediator role of the artists. The continued negotiation between central (ideology), regional (urbanization) and community (artists) levels, supporting each other for their own survival and legitimacy, forms the structure of China’s latest art market reform, in the name of cultural industries.

This paper consists of two parts. Part one conveys three key concepts of cultural and creative industries: cultural policy, urban development and artists – contextualized in Chinese political, economic and social conditions. Part two exemplifies the uniqueness of Chinese cultural industries through a case study of Xi’an Qinjiang company reform, which took place
in the late 2000s and early 2010s. For the completion of this paper, a one month period of field research took place in Xi’an, with the assistance of the Xi’an Arts Research Institution. Around twenty interviews were conducted, including scholars, performers, directors, senior administrators and audience members. The field research data forms the empirical base of this paper.

Part 1: Discourse of Chinese Cultural Industries

CCP Ideology vs. Cultural Policy

It has been suggested that China does not have culture policy per se. Instead, the CCP ideology provides direction for political, economic and cultural policy makings (Wang 2017, Su 2015, Ma 2015, Zhang 2010). In this section, we will focus on the evolution of CCP ideology and how it influences Chinese art market development.

Fei Xiaotong, the founding figure of Chinese sociology, states in his book From the Soil (1942) that the foundation of Chinese society is rural. In the creation of Modern China in the early twentieth century, whilst the Nationalist Party relied on economically powerful middle-class entrepreneurs to gain legitimacy, the Communist Party turned to the rural peasants and working class, which made up over 90 percent of the total population, for support. In 1942, Mao Zedong delivered Talks on Arts and Literature from the then CCP’s headquarter Yan’an. In this talk, Mao articulated that ‘our literature and art are for the workers, the class that leads the revolution; and peasants, the most numerous and most steadfast of our allies in the revolution’ (1972: 29). The CCP gained founding legitimacy and ruling power through the support of the peasants and workers with the promise of representing the historically repressed underclass and turning them into the new masters of the new regime, namely the People’s Republic of China (Su 2015, Chang 2009).
The CCP founding ideology and representation began to evolve in the post-Mao era. If Deng Xiaoping’s call in 1979 to allow ‘a small number of people to become rich first’ was accepted by the mass people as the short-term solution to economic development, Jiang Zemin’s 2002 statement of the Three Represents, which welcomed capitalists into CCP membership for the first time since the party’s establishment cast doubt on CCP representation and legitimacy (Jiang 2002: 177). Such ideological evolution continued, and in 2004, only a year after Hu Jintao’s succession (2003 to 2012), the President stressed his famous concept of a ‘unified harmonious society’, expressing the need for continuous economic growth in the name of ‘generating welfare for all’ (Zheng 2010: 66, emphasis is mine). Then in March 2007, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao made even more explicit references regarding ‘the party-state representation of all different viewpoints and sharing the world in common’ (Zheng 2010: 266, emphasis is mine). Such blurred ideological representation placed CCP legitimacy under increasing scrutiny (Lu 2015, Lu, Yang and Li 2008, Sato and Shi 2006, Chen 2001).

The CCP struggle of articulation of representation is reflected directly in the struggle of Chinese opera reform. In the post-Mao era, Chinese opera institutions, which were established in the 1950s, began to see the withdrawal state funding and were forced to justify their legitimacy through the dual pressures of economic profit making, whilst continuing to articulate CCP legitimacy (Ma 2015). The challenge, however, is that the base of the opera audience remains the rural population and urban working class. In the last decade, the world has seen China’s fast economic rise, but also witnessed a gulf of class division between a small number of elite class and the mass underclass, made up predominantly of peasants and workers (Xu 2014, Keith and Lash 2013, Wang 2006, Yao 2004). In the post-Mao era, these people constitute the lowest economic, social and educational group and are often referred to as ‘the disadvantaged group’ (Goodman 2014, Chen and Hamori 2014, Chung 2013). They cannot provide opera houses with required financial returns, hence opera company legitimacy, nor does the opulent opera represent the value and identity of the peasants and workers.
Increasingly, the opera houses abandoned their traditional fan group, nurturing instead the young professionals and middle class who possessed financial capital, but the least habitus for watching local opera and least desire to consume cultural products layered with CCP ideological value. Chinese opera’s alienation from both groups of audiences – the peasants and workers and the new middle class, reflects directly the CCP struggle to articulate its own legitimacy through attempts at representing ‘all’.

The significance of Xi Jinping’s 2014 Beijing Talk, addressing traditional art forms as the anchor of Chinese future cultural industries, and the directly following act of all members of the China Central Standing Committee collectively viewing Chinese opera, was not an aesthetic experience but a pointed symbolic act. They are clear attempts to re-articulate the CCP founding ideology from Mao’s era and the representation of the CCP’s founding supporters - peasants and workers, through viewing their associated art forms. The struggle of CCP altered ideological representation and attempted articulation are further reflected at regional level, in the process of urban development.

_Urban Development_

When the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, the Chinese urban rate was 10.6% of the total population, by 2011 the urban population reached 51.3%. For the first time in Chinese history, the majority of the population live in urban cities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007, 2011). In the past three decades, China’s urbanization has been focused on creating city distinction to attract tourists and investors (Fung and Erni 2013, Chen 2009). The dual pressure shouldered by the CCP – ideological and economic, further reflects at regional level. In this paper, I argue that there are two unique features for reginal government to achieve city distinction and fulfil ideological and economic assessment: first, the central-regional management structure; second, local property developers acting as project executioners.

1) Central-regional management structure
In the process of urbanization, China has been following a unique central-regional decentralization management structure: instead of having regional resources decentralized into the hands of individual entrepreneurs, they are placed under the management of the municipal government, with certain independent policy making and high profit attainment as incentives. If the ‘managers’ become overly unruly, for political and/or economic reasons, they would be dismissed and replaced by the central party-state management line. This is what is often referred to as the politically directed, market-oriented Chinese economic reform (Shirk 2011, Naughton 1996).

In *Practical Reasons* (1998), Bourdieu reminds us that in a socialist regime, the government monopolizes the market and functions as a ‘central bank’. The party-state has the power to redistribute resources and capitals to make new elites as appropriate. In China, the central government not only acts as the ‘central bank’ but also holds direct managerial power over regional government. This makes the central government the most powerful player in the game of market development and ensures regional government is obligated to support the CCP ideological direction, for maximized resource allocation and achieving urban distinction.

2) Property developers as project executioners

Once in line with the CCP ideological direction, the regional government needs to further demonstrate its legitimacy through market economic success. As China’s urban development consumes over 50 per cent of key global materials such as cement, iron ore, steel and coal; the real estates have become the main drivers of economic development and guarantee economic return (Anderlini 2011). To ensure quick profit return the regional government mostly assign projects to the property developers.

In the process of profit led economic reform, the first and hardest hit group are the rural peasants and urban workers. Between 1987 and 2001, 60 million rural residents lost claims to the land they had previously worked on, which has caused an unprecedented wave of rural to urban migration. Due to a unique two-class *hukou* system, which was introduced in 1958 to
control the population, rural hukou holders in urban cities have no claim to welfare systems such as housing, schooling or hospitals and limited legal protection. From the late 2000s, urban workers have experienced large scaled redundancy, with women and the middle aged being the hardest hit. Meanwhile, the government debt-financed property boom and infrastructural development had been focusing on gated valleys, internationally franchised shopping malls and the grand theatres which have dismembered the communities without the development of new ones (Harvey 2009, Cai 2000). Although the regional governments may have fulfilled, in the short term, their dual requirements of supporting CCP ideological direction, as well as generating profit, what accompanies is the loss of morality and belief – the scandal of baby milk contamination is one of many such examples. Fundamental questions of value, belief, ideological representation and legitimacy are directed not only at the regional governments, but ultimately point at the CCP (Lu 2015, Shi 2015, Goodman 2014: 44, Shen 2008).

Xi’s Beijing Speech ‘arts and artists must not lose direction in the wave of market economy, must not be the slave of capital’, and the CCP leading officials viewing of Chinese opera should be recognized as a crucial attempt to readdress the unbalanced social development, and class division and to articulate CCP representation and its own legitimacy. Such dilemma continues at community level.

Chinese Opera Artists and the Political Capital

Following on from Florida’s The Rise of the Creative Class (2002), there has been increasing research on Chinese artists’ roles in community building and civil society development (Kong 2014, Fung and Erni 2013, Lisitzin and Stovel 2003). In this paper, I articulate artists with reference to two groups: the traditional scholar artists and opera artists who obtained political distinction under Mao’s regime. I argue that, both artists’ groups act as the mediators to the central-regional government, actively reviving regional art market and local communities. However, pressure to preserve their own legitimacy and distinction means that their mediator’s
role is to provide collaboration, rather than challenging the central ideological direction and regional government market development. Their support to opera art forms and associated local communities may be valuable but is limited.

1) Elite Gentry Artists

Fei Xiaotong in *China's gentry: essays on rural-urban relations* states that in a traditional agrarian society such as China, although government rule may be dictatorial from the top, the force of that power does not penetrate to community level to any great extent. Instead, the basic unit of the society is family and the ruling power is generated through patriarchal privilege, or what is normally called ‘paternalism’ - Rule by Elders. In particular, these male rulers are predominantly the learned Confucius scholars (*shidaifu*) (1980). Historically, they stood at the pinnacle of society, second only to members of the Imperial family. They were the leading figures of the community and took on key roles in negotiating between the imperial ruling, county official management and community building (Yao 2000, Murck 1980: 1).

2) New Elite Opera Artists

At the opposite side of social stratum were the Chinese opera performers. Amongst the nine categories of careers in Chinese culture, scholars were placed at the top whilst opera singers formed the lowest category (*sanjiaojiuliu*), after the prostitutes and beggars (Goldman and Leo 2002, Schwartz 1996: 38). Kraus (2004) in *The Party and the Arty in China* pointed out that under the People’s Republic of China, artists gained their professional status. I would add that through the redistribution of political capitals, such as opera institutions and titles, artists not just gained professional status but became state people. For the first time in Chinese history, opera singers were now elite class. This change is unprecedented (Ma 2015: 43).

Evasdottir (2004) in *Obedient Autonomy* argues that the Chinese scholar exists with the constant dilemma between retaining their intellectual integrity on the one hand alongside fulfilling their obligations to the government and to the mass population on the other. Although the scholars are the leading figures of the community and took on key roles in negotiating
between the imperial ruling, county official management and community building, their self-preservation based reluctance to challenge limit their ability to make changes in any extensive manner. Before becoming the ‘elite class’, oral opera performers acted for audiences of their own class. They often mocked the state in performances, challenging and questioning injustices on behalf of their own audience, the repressed underclass (Wu 2006). Upon receiving the state noble status, they were conscious of retaining their own distinction and legitimacy, which was only obtained through a unique historical opportunity. Just as the scholar artists, opera artists face the same dilemma that scholars have been confronting for centuries: the conflict between fulfilling their obligation to the mass audience and serving the state. Their liberal spirit to challenge and to mock the state, exactly what was feared by the state and tackled with imposed censorship, was lost.

In the 21st century, both scholar artists and opera artists are active mediators between community, regional and central governments. They lobby on behalf of the community for resource and they report the dilemma of art market reform. However, as ‘state people’ and ‘elite class’, their lobbying collaborates with the party-state, rather than questions its representation and legitimacy. It is therefore, that the artists’ role in mediating is crucial, there is very little fundamental alteration to the condition of opera forms and their associated audience. I will now contextualise the theories we have outlined into the case study of Xi’an Qinxiang cultural industry reform. I argue that reason for the CCP to maintain the sole legal ruling power despite fundamental ideological alteration. I argue that it lies in China’s unique regional-central government structure and the social mediator roles occupied by the artists. The continued negotiation between central (ideology), regional (urbanization) and community (artists) levels, supporting each other for their own survival and legitimacy, forms the structure of China’s latest art market reform, in the name of cultural industries.

Part 2: Case Study Qinxiang Cultural Industries Reform
Few non-Chinese readers will be familiar with Qinqiang or Qin opera but will no doubt have heard of the Terracotta Army and the Great Wall of China. Qin is the name for the region in today’s Shan’xi province. Qiang means musical sound and Qinqiang is translated as the musical sound of Qin. Qinqiang first emerged around mid-Qin State (770BC – 221 BC) and was evolved into a popular regional song across central China, including Shan’xi, Shanxi and Gansu (Ruan 2006). In 221BC, Yinzeng, the ruler of the Qin region unified China and crowned himself as the first Emperor of China, with its’ capital set up at today’s Xi’an. This very word Qinqiang is associated with the historical Chinese empire (Zhao and Lan 2014: 11). Developed in the central agricultural landscape of the Yellow Earth, Qinqiang is associated with the sound of rural peasants and their way of life. Qi Rushan, Chinese modern cultural critic, claims that: ‘in order to understand China, one must know Qinqiang’ (quoted in Zhen 2013).

In 1912, amidst China’s modernization, a Shan’xi scholar named Li Tongxuan established the first modern Qinqiang company in Xi’an, naming it Yi Su Society. The very name symbolized Chinese scholars’ ambitions in developing a modern China: to evolve (Yi) (peasant audience) traditional way of thinking (Su) through revolutionising opera (production and artists). In 1951, after several years of inactivity due to the Japanese and Civil Wars, Xi’an municipal government re-established Yi Su Society, as the first State Qinqiang House (Zhen 2013, Wang 2011: 33). It was under the PRC Yi Su Society that all rural performers obtained urban status and unprecedented political capitals and became ‘state people’. In the post-Mao market era, opera institutions across China undertook market reform. Economic gain became increasingly the way of assessing opera company legitimacy as well as them conforming to CCP ideology. The CCP’s latest cultural industries movement changed the fate of Qinqiang irreversibly.
From the early 2000s, the CCP has been brewing its Eurasian grand strategy through claiming the Silk Route. When US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed a ‘New Silk Road’ to describe a U.S. Policy in 2011, in responding to a north-south axis designed to improve Afghanistan’s economy, the Chinese party-state had ‘sleepless nights’ (Fallon 2015: 141). In 2013, Xi Jinping first announced an east-northwest axis ‘One Road and One Belt’ plan, emphasizing both land and maritime silk roads, with starting points in China. In this new claim, Xi’an appeared on the latest geographical map as the beginning of the land silk route. On 27th May 2015, the first One Belt One Road China National Forum was held in Xi’an. In this forum, strategic infrastructure plans and investment details were announced, with Xi’an being the centre of this new distinction (Xinhua Net 2016).

Xi’an is a city with layers of symbolic capitals and historical distinction. Since the archaeological discovery of the Terracotta Army in the 1970s, Xi’an city’s distinction has been focused on the Qin dynasty (221BC-220AD) and Qinjiang as both the preferred community entertainment and distinctive regional cultural capital. However, to support the CCP’s new ideological direction, and to secure maximum central economic investment, Xi’an city shifted its long-established Qin distinction to the Tang dynasty (644AD-988AD). It was during the Tang period that Monk Xuanzong brought back the Sanskrit from India through the silk route under the royal Tang mission. This part of history is well documented and provided Xi’an and China the legitimate claim to the starting point of the silk road (Zhao and Lian 2014, Zhen 2013, Chen 2011, He 2010).

From the early 2000s, the Xi’an municipal government had begun contracting Qu Jiang New District Property Developer (QJ hereafter) for city regeneration. One of the main QJ developments has been the building of the Grand Tang Theme Park. Since 2013, in line with Xi Jinping’s initial announcement of a ‘One Road and One Belt’ plan, further investment has been put into the Grand Tang Theme Park, with marketing material focused on the Grand Goose Pagoda, where it is claimed the Sanskrit brought back from India was stored,
highlighting Monk Xuanzong’s successful completion of the silk route mission. In the shifted rebranding of Xi’an culture from the Qin Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty, it is to be noted that as there is no specific opera associated with Tang, a new cultural industry focused on Tang dance, with a show produced specifically for visitors. From the early 2010s, in collaboration with Xi’an Dance Company, Xi’an municipal government and QJ co-produced the Grand Tang Performance. Nearly every visitor to Xi’an will be advised at tourist information desks and all hotels to take the Dumpling Banquet with the Grand Tang Performance. Tang culture swiftly developed into a new chain of cultural industries, ranging from theme parks, grand performances and banquets. Tang culture became the latest invented Xi’an cultural identity and distinction, supporting the CCP’s strategic plan of ‘One Road and One Belt’, and securing central investment for sketching such a grand blueprint.

In the process of city rebranding, funding originally allocated to Qinqiang was reduced substantially. From the mid 2000s under the new slogan of ‘cultural industries reform’, Xi’an municipal government transferred management power of all Qinqiang Companies from the municipal cultural department to QJ. The most controversial move came on the 10th June 2009, when QJ ordered all Qinqiang Houses in Xi’an to change from non-profit to profit-making organizations. Three largest Qinqiang Companies were requested to merge into the Yi Su Society, with all performers aged 45 and above being made redundant. All these changes were completed within 90 days. This process was proudly referenced by QJ as to have resolved issues with ‘one single swing of a machete’ (yidaoqie) (private communication, 29th January 2015) and the act was further praised by Xi’an government as ‘the model example of Xi’an cultural industries reform success’ (He 2010: 259-263).

In response to the ‘cultural industries reform’, some artists took actions to lobby against the destruction of community, trying to preserve Qinqiang. The examples given in this paper are scholar artist Zhong Mingshan and opera artist Dir. Liu.

1) Scholar Artist and the Qinqiang Museum
Zhong Mingshan describes himself as an archaeologist, historian and devoted Qinjiang lover. To others, Zhong is a nationally renowned scholar artist, famous for his calligraphy and painting. His work has been admired by many state leaders, with patrons including former president Jiang Zemin. Such connections provide Zhong the best opportunities for lobbying for Qinjiang. Since Qinjiang cultural industries reform, Zhong has been petitioning directly to his patron Jiang Zemin for ‘the criminal act’ that QJ have caused to the indigenous culture and community life (private communication, 20th January 2015). Zhong’s complaining did not stop the CCP orchestrated Xi’an city rebranding, nor the municipal government contracted property developers fast profit return. What Zhong did obtain from the central government is a Qinjiang museum space.

In 2013, the first Qinjiang museum opened in Xi’an Jiaotong University, located in the suburbs of Xi’an. It is a grand and spacious three-floor building with the basement level contains the performing space of a traditional theatre with around fifty seats. The ground floor displays a variety of cultural items ranging from the first original handwritten Qinjiang scripts to ancient musical instruments, costumes and other related pieces. The spiral stairs in the middle of the exhibition room lead to the second floor which has further collections from the oldest Qinjiang scripts to a set of Qinjiang leather puppets used in Zhang Yimou’s film To Live. The space is used for University Students Quality Training (suzhi jiaoyu jidi) – a compulsory training programme involving traditional art forms, imposed on all Chinese university students since the 1989 Tiananmen event. However, during the entire month of my research, the grand space was permanently empty. When I asked Zhong if a city centre space had been explored to attract more visitors, Zhang showed agitation:

‘Don’t ask me why I have the museum in a university instead of the city centre. Of course I know this place is too tucked away and the city centre is the first location I sought after. But nowadays in China everything has been passed onto the property developer. The municipal cultural bureau does
not even have a say in cultural space management. This space is the result of my direct contact with high up. Our own culture is destroyed under the very name of cultural industries (wenhua chanye)!

I will continue to lobby until the wrong is put right!’ (Private communication, 20th January 2015)

Until this day, Zhong articulates the need for Qinjiang performing space in the city centre and the importance of educating the younger generation to learn about Qinjiang. Despite the empty museum, Zhong is positive that the current madness of ‘cultural industries reform’ is temporary and local Qinjiang as the community people’s way of life will return in the future. Until that day arrives, Zhong will continue to work in his museum space, on a university campus that is tucked away from city visitors and the fast changing urban landscape.

2) Opera Artist and Qinjiang Troupe

Director Liu became a member of the Yi Su Society in the 1950s. He was trained in Qinjiang performance and later specialised in script writing. When Liu retired in the early 2000s he witnessed the process of cultural industries reform with the large redundancy of middle aged actors and felt a strong sense of duty to bring these performers back onto the stage:

‘They are too young to retire from the stage. It is extremely difficult to train opera performers, as it is a highly synthetic art form consisting of dancing, performing, singing and acting, children need to start their training from 4 or 5 years of age in order to achieve the right posture and aesthetic body movements; just when they are able to perform, they are made redundant! They have been well trained and they can offer the best performance to the audience’ (Private communication, 29th January 2015).

In 2007, Liu established the Xi’an Qinjiang Association, with performers consisting entirely of redundant staff from all Xi’an Qinjiang companies. No one takes any regular wage, payment is only allocated through performance. The association performs both traditional and
new productions. Liu writes scripts and co-directs performances with actors. Because of this, everyone now addresses him with the respectful title of Dir. Liu.

The main challenge that Liu’s opera troupe faces is the expensive urban theatre rental fee. According to Dir. Liu, under QJ, Xi’an city’s small to medium scaled theatres were bulldozed. To ensure the troupe’s survival, Dir. Liu takes the team to the rural countryside, where they still perform for community gatherings and are paid collectively by village organizations:

‘Qinqiang has a very good audience base in both urban cities and in the countryside. However, it is increasingly difficult to obtain affordable space to perform in urban cities and the box office struggles to sell individual tickets. These are not issues in the countryside as the performance is paid for by the organization for everyone to enjoy in a public space – like how opera has been staged for thousands of years in China. The most profitable and popular performance source we are making nowadays is indeed through rural tours” (Private communication, 29th January 2015).

However, in the past seven years, Dir. Liu has witnessed entire villages disappear within a fortnight, for various property development projects. This means the disappearance of the rural audience along with performing space. Liu’s troupe had to travel further away to seek audiences. To do this, Liu required a Performing Vehicle - a big container truck which, once stationed, can be opened and used as a stage. It is a key investment for a private performing company, however, Dir. Liu’s troupe struggled to purchase one. Liu had been writing regularly to the regional government applying for one and it was not until the early-2010s, due to the increasing reputation of Liu’s Qinqiang Association, that the company was eventually granted one. They are now able to drive further into the countryside and charge around 10,000RMB per performance, which lasts between 4 to 6 hours. With no rental fees and bills met by collective villages funds, Liu’s troupe is not only covering its costs, but is also able to pay the
actors. By 2015, eight years after its initial set up, Liu’s troupe has become self-sustaining and started to recruit young members for the development of the Xi’an Qinjiang Association.

Throughout my interviews, neither of the two artists criticised the CCP for the effect of its ideological alteration on opera and its associated audience, nor on regional government market management style, such as contracting property developers to execute cultural projects. Instead, the criticism is focused on QJ and its way of managing and executing art companies and art markets. Both are proud of their individual achievements in securing a museum space and performing vehicle, and they are keen to continue collaborating with the regional government and supporting the CCP.

Conclusion

Contextualized in the case study of Xi’an Qinjiang cultural industries reform, this article argued that the struggle of Chinese opera house reform in the new millennium exemplifies the evolution of the CCP in gaining legitimacy. Xi’s 2014 Beijing Speech and the viewing of Chinese opera by all seven members of the China Central Standing Committee should not be viewed as an aesthetic experience but a crucial step in attempting to re-address CCP altered ideological representation. Whilst obtaining increased economic power, the CCP also face the challenge of widening class division, rural and urban uneven development, all of which questions the CCP’s founding value, representation and legitimacy. Despite fundamental ideological alteration, the CCP managed to maintain legal power relies on China’s unique regional-central government structure and the social mediator roles occupied by the artists. The continued negotiation at central, regional and community levels, supporting each other for their own survival and legitimacy, is central to the consolidation of the CCP ruling legitimacy.

However, this paper also points out that without questioning the CCP ideological alteration, the regional government’s dual economic and ideological pressures and artist ‘obedient autonomy’, the provision of ‘token gestures’, such as a museum space outside the
city centre and a travel vehicle, provide little improvement to the Chinese opera market struggle and its associated audiences’ political, economic and social conditions. Traditional Chinese opera, together with its associated audience of peasants and workers continue to withstand the tests of their survival, which reflects directly the CCP’s internal turmoil in gaining its own legitimacy. Such struggles highlight the intimate relationship between Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideological evolution and the struggle of Chinese opera market reform, this time, in the name of cultural industries.
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