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## Chinese Cultural and Creative Industries and the struggle for Rights in Chinese Opera

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### Abstract

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In the last decade, China's government has been supportive of various cultural trends in creative cities, intangible cultural heritage, and the arts. This paper examines the discourse of Chinese cultural and creative industries (CCI), specifically from the position of traditional Chinese opera. By focusing on the Xi'an *Qinqiang* (Qin opera) cultural industries reform, this article articulates the intimate relationship between Communist Party's (CCP) ideological evolution and the struggle of Chinese opera's development. As Chinese opera has been, and still is, a popular cultural form amongst peasants and workers (the founding base of the CCP), the struggle of the opera market reforms reflects the CCP internal turmoil in gaining its own political (representative) legitimacy. The paper suggests that despite fundamental ideological shifts, the CCP maintains sole legal ruling power over culture because of 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 forms the structure of China's latest art market reform and allows us to understand the struggle of culture within the nation.

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## Introduction

The concept of "Rights" may be universally recognised, and universal in its theoretical application, but is always subject to national, regional and cultural political economy. Indeed even where a country is signatory to international treaties (in 1997 China ratified The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights or ICESCR), it does not follow that the terms of the treaties will be self-evident in a regional or local cultural context. The context of this paper is China – as a society whose conditions of development is its recent socio-cultural history. Indeed, China has recently been supportive of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015), and the following Sustainable Development Goals (the SDG's, from 2016), and also various cultural trends in creative cities, intangible cultural heritage, the arts and creative industries. Nonetheless, the concept of "cultural rights" in China is only partially intelligible (as is the concept of "human rights" in general – notwithstanding its new National Human Rights Action Plan 2016-2020).

In this article, I do not want to assess the relationship between human rights and culture, or attempt to discern the nature of cultural rights within Chinese society and its political regime. I wish to pursue a subject where the struggle for cultural rights can be identified as *immanent* to the socio-historical development of China's culture – that is to say, in a form whose conditions are the ideological shifts in China's stratified governance, enduring Communist Party (the CCP), and the management of economy and demography. The ideological shifts are vast, and here I can only refer to the arts and creative industries, but it is possible to articulate how the arts and creative industries have become a site for a struggle of legitimacy – for both artists and Communist Party. This article attempts to untangle this interrelated struggle, and with a view to understanding the concept of "rights" in a sense that registered the complexity of a political economy only obliquely related to Western norms. A "right" in China is not a simple self-assertion or self-evident in its application; it is embedded in a complex struggle for identity,

legitimacy and authority, and always involves culture.

## Chinese Opera and Chinese Cultural Industries

On 15<sup>th</sup> October 2014, after Xi Jinping's inauguration, the President gave *Talks on Literature and Art* 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 events: this was the first time since Mao Zedong's 1942 Yan'an 'Talks on Literature and Art' 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, and which has been repeated annually to this day. This paper explores the significance of Chinese opera in relation to the CCP ideological evolution, contextualised in the broader and significant cultural industries reform.

China market reform was launched in 1978 in selected rural areas under the theme of the "responsibility system". Once it proved successful, in the mid 1980s, it was expanded to urban cities, across material and art sectors. Under this scheme, art institutions take responsibility for their own economic survival, and individual artists are encouraged to create and make profit outside the institutions. Market reform may have accelerated since 1992 (following the Tiananmen Square event) but for the art institutions, it was not until the early 2000s that art market reform was intensified with a newly emerging discourse of Cultural and Creative Industries. In 2004, the

phrase 'Cultural and Creative Industries' first arrived in Shanghai when the Shanghai Creative Industries Development Forum 2004, the first of its kind in China, was held in Shanghai (Li 2011: 13). The discourse follows closely the 1998 UK policy of reviving the post-industrial society through culture and creativity (DCMS, 1998). It was not until 2009, however, that Chinese national policy adopted the term and formed a visible policy discourse. Between the policy synonyms of cultural industries, cultural economy, creative industries and creative economy, China preferred "Cultural and Creative Industries" – hereafter, CCI (White and Xu, 2012). Since 2010, we have seen intensified nationwide art market restructuring under the new name of CCI reform. China's new political and economic ambition is set to make the CCI its pillar economy by 2020 (Zhang, 2017, Ma, 2015, White and Xu, 2012, Su, 2011, Zheng, 2010, Hartley and Montgomery, 2009, O'Connor, 2009, Chang 2009, Kong, 2005, Keane, 2004).

In the monograph, *Urban Politics and Cultural Capital, the case of Chinese opera* (Ma, 2015), the author defines the interrelation between the struggle of Chinese art market reform/CCI reform in the new millennium and the CCPs' struggle in retaining political (representative) legitimacy. This is, as the author argues, because Chinese opera has been, and remains, 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 social 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 article expands the above argument in relation to China's art market reforms within the latest discourse of cultural and creative industries. Contextualized in the case study of Xi'an *Qinqiang* (Qin opera) institution reform in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, this paper argues that Xi Jinping's inaugurated speech on Literature and Art, together with the CCP's leading members collective opera viewing, highlight the urgency of the CCP's re-articulation of its representation and legitimacy. This paper suggests that despite fundamental alterations in 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 social 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 and creative 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 terms of China's political, economic and social conditions. Part two exemplifies the uniqueness of Chinese cultural industries through a case study of Xi'an *Qinqiang* 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 basis of the argumentation.

## Part 1: Discourse of Chinese Cultural and Creative Industries

### *CCP Ideology vs. Cultural Policy*

It has been suggested that China does not have a national culture policy. Instead, the CCP has provided systematic direction for political, economic and cultural policy making (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* (1947/1992) that the foundation of Chinese society emerges from *the 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 for support, (and which made up over 90 percent of the total population). In 1942, Mao Zedong delivered his famous 'Talks on Literature and Art' from the then CCP's headquarters in 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 a founding legitimacy and then 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 modes of political 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", welcomed capitalists into CCP membership, cast doubt on CCP representation and legitimacy (Jiang 2002: 177). This 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 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 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 in the practice of political 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 of state funding, and were forced to justify their legitimacy through the dual demands of economic profit-making and a continued role in CCP legitimacy-maintenance (Ma, 2015). The challenge, however, was 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 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 constituted the lowest economic, social and educational group and are still 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 contribute to the opera company's own legitimacy-building, nor does the opulent opera represent the value and identity of the peasants and workers. Increasingly, the opera houses abandoned their traditional audience constituency, nurturing instead young professionals and the new middle class who possessed financial capital. However, these new audience groups possessed the least "habitus" (in Bourdieu's sense) for the appreciation of local opera, and also possessed the least desire to "consume" cultural products that are embedded with CCP ideological values. Chinese opera's alienation from both categories of audience – the peasants and workers and the new middle class – articulates the CCP's own struggle to speak its own legitimacy to society's new constituencies, while continuing to represent "*all*".

The significance of Xi Jinping's 2014 Beijing Talk, addressing traditional art forms as the anchor of Chinese future and its cultural industries, and the

following event where all the members of the China Central Standing Committee joined an opera audience, was not merely cultural or aesthetic. It was a politically symbolic act. It was a re-articulation of the CCP's founding ideology (from Mao's era) involving an unmistakable representation of the CCP's founding constituencies – peasants and workers. Moreover, we can identify the ideological struggle of the CCP and its modes of representation at a regional level, in the growing phenomenon of urban development.

#### *Urban Development*

When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the Chinese urban rate of growth was from a baseline of 10.6% of the total population; by 2011, the urban population is 51.3%. For the first time in Chinese history, the majority of the population live in urban cities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007, 2011); and in the past three decades, China's urbanization has been focused on creating city distinction and attractions for both tourists and investors (Fung and Erni, 2013; Chen, 2009). The creation of successful cities is a major national policy objective. The dual pressure shouldered by the CCP – ideological and economic – is therefore further refracted at regional and municipal levels. There are two dimensions of governance, representation and legitimacy-building for regional and municipal government – two distinctive areas of ideological and economic pressure – central-regional management, and local property developers (acting as project executioners). We will consider these both.

#### *Central-regional management structure*

In the recent rapid and politically-engineered process of mass urbanisation in China, the country has been following a unique central-regional decentralization management structure. Instead of having regional resources decentralized into the hands of individual entrepreneurs, they are all placed under the management of the municipal government, with certain independent policy-making responsibilities and high-profit attainment as an incentive. If the 'managers' become overly unruly, for political and/or economic reasons, they could be dismissed and replaced by members of

the central party-state management. This is what is often referred to in the context of the politically directed, market-oriented strategic framework of China's economic reform (Shirk, 2011; Naughton, 1996).

In *Practical Reason: On the theory of action* (1998), Bourdieu reminds us that in a socialist regime, the government monopolizes the market and effectively functions as a "central bank", where 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 a central bank but also holds direct managerial power over regional government. Even if this seeming line-management is complex, it makes central government the fulcrum and most powerful player in the game of market development, and ensures that regional (and municipal) government is obligated to support CCP ideological development, for maximized resource allocation, policy development, and therefore the successful growth of its major cities and thus economy as a whole.

#### *Property developers as project executioners*

Once in line with the CCP ideological development, the regional government needs to further demonstrate its legitimacy through market economic success. As China's urban development consumes over 50 per cent of its natural resource production (iron ore, steel and coal and so on), the construction industry has become a major driver of economic development and guaranteed economic returns for any municipality (Anderlini, 2011). To ensure a quick profit return (and registered economic development indications) a regional government assigns major public works projects to property developers.

In the process of such profit-led economic reform, the primary groups for which change is registered is the rural peasants and urban workers. Between 1987 and 2001, over 60 million rural residents lost claims to the land on which they had previously worked, generating an unprecedented wave of rural-to-urban migration. Due to a unique two-class *hukou* system – which was introduced in 1958 to manage population distribution – rural *hukou* holders in urban cities have no claim to

welfare systems such as housing, schooling or hospitals and are also awarded limited legal protection. And from the mid 1990s, urban workers have experienced large scale redundancy, with women and the middle aged suffering the worst. Meanwhile, the government property boom and infrastructural development had been focusing on "gated valleys" (security-zoned residential luxury housing), internationally franchised shopping malls, and grand theatres, facilitated by urban planning methods that have effectively dismembered social communities without allowing for the development of new ones (Harvey, 2009; Cai, 2000). Even though regional governments may thus have fulfilled, in the short term, their dual requirements in supporting CCP ideological direction as well as economic development, a by-product is the loss of trust and political clarity in the function of government. This extends to a loss of morality and fundamental political belief in the principles of the State. The national scandal of baby milk contamination after July 2008 – with an estimated 300,000 victims and an international scandal after attracting the World Health Organisation – was symptomatic of a lack of political focus on the non-economic non-governmental aspects of social life. Fundamental questions of value, belief, ideological representation and legitimacy are now routinely directed not only at the regional governments but the CCP (Lu, 2015; Shi, 2015; Goodman, 2014: 44; Shen, 2008).

Xi's Beijing Speech, asserting that "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, can be situated within a reargued attempt to readdress the ideological impact of a hugely imbalanced social development through rapid urbanisation. Moreover, the significant issue remains in the form of the consequent exacerbation of class divisions, and how the CCP are managing and articulating their own legitimacy. This issue pertains at community level.

*Chinese Opera Artists and the Political Capital*  
Following Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), there has been increasing research on Chinese artists, community building and civil

society development (Kong, 2014; Fung and Erni, 2013; Lisitzin and Stovel, 2002). Artists as a professional category can be sub-divided into two basic groups: the traditional "scholar artists", and "opera artists" or performers who obtained political distinction under Mao's regime. Both artists' groups act as mediators of central-regional government policy, actively reviving regional art markets and local communities. However, pressure to preserve their own professional identity and distinction means that their role as mediators is collaborative in nature; they do not function independently, and not in a way in which they could challenge the ideological development of regional government market-orientation. Their support of opera art forms and associated local communities may be valuable, but is limited.

#### 1) Historical Elite Scholar Artists

Fei Xiaotong in *China's gentry: essays on rural-urban relations* (1980) asserted that in a traditional agrarian society (such as China), although government rule may be dictatorial, the force of that form of power does not penetrate to community level to any great extent. Instead, the basic unit of society is family, and a truly pervasive power is generated through patriarchal privilege, or what is traditionally called paternalism – the notional rule by elders. In particular, and historically in China, these male elders or rulers were predominantly learned Confucius scholars (*shidaifu*). They maintained a position of respect at the pinnacle of Chinese society, second only to members of the Imperial family. They were the leading figures of the community and took on key roles, such as in negotiating between the imperial rule, local economy management and community building (Yao, 2000, Murck, 1980: 1).

#### 2) New Elite Opera Artists

At the opposite end of the social stratum were the Chinese opera performers. In traditional Chinese society, scholars were certainly at the top of social career scales, whilst opera singers, together with prostitutes and beggars formed the lowest category (Goldman and Leo, 2002; Schwartz, 1996: 38). Kraus in *The Party and the Arty in China* (2004) pointed out that under the People's Republic of China, performers gained a significant professional artistic status. While this is true, but

with the State distribution of political capital and recognition, principally through institutions and titles, the fundamental change is artists were co-opted into the State. Though state patronage, opera singers became part of an elite social class. This change was unprecedented and altered the artists' historical relationship with the State (Ma, 2015: 43).

Evasdottir in *Obedient Autonomy* (2004), argues that the Chinese scholar exists within a constant dilemma, and so struggling to retain a sense of intellectual integrity – between simultaneously fulfilling their obligations to government and to the mass population. Even though scholars are the leading historical figures in any local community, their sense of self-preservation made them reluctant to challenge the limits on their political influence. Before becoming the elite class themselves, opera performers acted for the audiences of their own class, often mocked the State, challenged and questioned injustice on behalf of their audience, which were, of course, the lower classes (Wu, 2006). Upon receiving noble status, opera performers were conscious of that their new found distinction and professional legitimacy was only obtained through a unique historical opportunity. And as with the scholars, opera performers faced the same dilemma of integrity: their obligation to the masses and to serving the state on whose patronage they had received. Their historically liberal spirit, seizing the freedom to challenge and mock authority, with increasingly imposed State censorship, was lost.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, both scholar artists and opera artists, remain active mediators between community, regional and central governments. They lobby on behalf of the community for resources, and they routinely report on dilemmas emerging in cultural and art market reforms. However, as elite and recognised servants of the State, the political complexion of their lobbying is such that it is entirely compatible with the political protocols of party and State, and no threat to the State's legitimacy. And given how little the community structure (and position of scholars) and social class-basis of opera audiences have changed, the artists' role in mediating between the State and the people remains a

significant one, if currently noncontentious. Given the fundamental ideological shifts and changes in governance I outlined above, and the continued need for the CCP to maintain a role as uncontested socio-political authority, the critical juncture of strength that allows this apparent contradiction to be maintained is the juncture between China's unique regional-central government structure and the social mediation roles of the artists. This juncture is a 'trialectical' and dynamic cooperation – between central government (the source of national ideology), regional government (managing urbanisation and economic growth) and local community (where the artists media with the masses through times of profound change). Each of these political spheres co-operate and support each other for their own survival and legitimacy. To understand in more detail how this works, we need to consider the structure of China's latest discourse of art and market reforms – the Xi'an *Qinqiang* (Qin opera) cultural industries reform.

## Part 2: Case Study *Qinqiang* 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. *Qinqiang* is transliterated 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, Yinzheng, 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, two years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Xi'an municipal government re-established the Yi Su Society as the first State *Qinqiang* House (Zhen, 2013, Wang, 2011: 33). Yi Su Society rural performers obtained urban status and unprecedented political recognition and benefitted from State patronage. In the post-Mao market era, opera institutions across China experienced market reforms, where, earning their own revenues, their visible economic gain became a political indicator of their artistic legitimacy (through popularity with the masses), on condition they also served to promote CCP legitimacy. The CCP's very latest reforms have changed the fate of *Qinqiang* irreversibly.

From the early 2000s, the CCP had been engaged in extensive strategic economic development, the great New Silk Road project. When US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed a 'New Silk Road' to describe a U.S. Policy in 2011 – an imagined north-south axis designed to make war-torn Afghanistan a regional hub – the CCP reportedly had "sleepless nights" (Fallon, 2015: 141). In 2013, Xi Jinping first announced an east-northwest axis for China – a 'One Road and One Belt' plan, emphasizing both land and maritime Silk roads, with their starting points in China. In this new revision of the concept, Xi'an appeared on the latest geographical mapping as the beginning of the land Silk route. Consequently, on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 2015, the first One Belt One Road China National Forum was held in Xi'an. In this forum, State 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 meaning 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 *Qinqiang* as both

the preferred community entertainment and distinctive regional cultural capital. However, to support the CCP's new ideological orientation, and to secure maximum central economic investment, Xi'an city shifted its long-established Qin association 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 nationally the legitimate claim to establish the starting point of any new land-based Silk route (Zhao and Lan, 2014; Zhen, 2013; Chen, 2011; He, 2010).

From the early 2000s, the Xi'an municipal government had begun contracting the Qu Jiang New District Property Developer (QJ hereafter) for strategic city regeneration. One of the main QJ developments has been the building of the Grand Tang Theme Park, and since 2013, in line with Xi Jinping's '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 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, but now a new cultural industry around Tang dance, manifest in 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, and 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 industry ventures, 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, within a policy announced as the "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 10<sup>th</sup> 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, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2015). The rapid dictate 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 *Qinqiang* 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 *Qinqiang*. Since *Qinqiang* 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 of the locale (private communication, 20<sup>th</sup> 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 *Qinqiang* museum space.

In 2013, the first *Qinqiang* 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 *Qinqiang* scripts to ancient musical instruments, costumes and other related pieces. The spiral stairs in the middle of the exhibition room leads to the second floor, which has further collections from the oldest *Qinqiang* scripts to a set of *Qinqiang* leather puppets used in Zhang Yimou's internationally popular film *To Live* (1994). The space is used for University Students Quality Training Base (*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, Zhong displayed some 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 was 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, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2015)

Until this day, Zhong articulates the need for *Qinqiang* performing space in the city centre, and the importance of educating the younger generation to learn about *Qinqiang*. Despite the empty museum, Zhong is positive that the current madness of "cultural industries reform" is temporary and local *Qinqiang* 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 Qinqiang Troupe*

Director Liu became a member of the Yi Su Society in the 1950s. He was trained in *Qinqiang* 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, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2015).

In 2007, Liu established the Xi'an *Qinqiang* Association, with performers consisting entirely of redundant staff from all Xi'an *Qinqiang* 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 and medium scaled theatres were cleared for urban development. 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 no 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, 29<sup>th</sup> 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 *Qinqiang* Association.

Throughout the interviews, neither of the two artists criticised the CCP or government for the impacts of its ideological orientation on opera and its audiences, nor on regional government market management style, such as the contracting of 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 *Qinqiang* 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 simply a cultural choice but a crucial step in attempting to re-address CCP's ideological orientation. Whilst obtaining increased economic power, the CCP also faces the challenge of a widening class division, rural and urban uneven development, all of which questions the CCP's founding values, political representation and thus legitimacy. Despite fundamental ideological developments, 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 article also points out that without questioning the CCP ideological orientation, 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 struggle for the right to practice their historical culture, which is bound up with the CCP's internal struggle for re-gaining its own legitimacy. Such struggles highlight the intimate relationship between Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideological evolution, cultural rights, and the market reforms (in the name of the cultural industries).

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