



# Chinese cultural policy and the cultural industries



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## ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 21st century, starting with institutional reform as result of economic globalization, China's cultural industries have witnessed a rapid development. At the positive end, some commentators argued that China's cultural industries will keep growing strongly with its size and scale increasing year by year; the contribution of cultural industries to economy and society is constantly on the rise; cultural enterprises will grow rapidly in the next decade; state enterprises begin to expand into the cultural sector and their production ability is significantly improved; culture and technology are more closely integrated than previously – new sectors are emerging to fill the gaps within the industries; the construction of investment and financing system and the development of cultural resources are being gradually standardized; industrial clustering has become the trend; cultural export increases; cultural trade prospers; cultural market is unprecedentedly active. According to statistics, since 2004, cultural industries have grown with an annual growth rate of over 15% and 6% higher than the concurrent GDP growth rate. It seems to suggest that cultural industries have changed the landscape of China's culture and economy, and have strongly participated in the modern transition of Chinese society.

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## Introduction

This paper looks at the changing relationship between Chinese cultural policy and the cultural industries as a policy object. The cultural industries are not just a designated group of industries 'out there' which policy then works on; in many cases policy actively constructs an object for policy and tries to identify those actors with which it might work as representatives or 'voice' (O'Connor, 2013). In the Chinese case we are faced with a very distinct policy trajectory, one engaged in a transition from a planned socialist economy to one relying increasingly on the market. Older socialist notions of culture and cultural policy as propaganda, and a definition of cultural industries relying on an unmediated link to Adorno's account of their primarily ideological role (Adorno, 1991; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979), increasingly encountered Western policy flows which presented the cultural industries in a positive light as a source of economic growth. This trajectory has exacerbated many of the tensions between economic and cultural

value already present in the notion of cultural industries in the west (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; O'Connor, 2013). This situation was made more complex and confusing when the term 'creative industries' arrived in 2006 (O'Connor and Gu, 2006).

For the purposes of this article we use the term cultural industries in its broadest sense of the visual and performing arts, along with those industries with the mass production and distribution of cultural goods – television, radio, film, press, publishing, music recording, computer games and so on. The term 'creative industries' is notoriously difficult to pin down either conceptually or definitionally (O'Connor, 2013). The Chinese government tends to use it to refer to design (fashion, software, product) industries and a shifting array of business services, R&D intensive and intellectual property related sectors. These 'creative industries', with less ideological import and more commercial goals, are then split off from the 'cultural industries' which may have ideological aspects and which involve ideological values which the state may want to promote or protect. However, given that the cultural industries are increasingly expected to work through the market this division is increasingly unstable. The default position has been to call the whole sector cultural creative industries (cf.

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O'Connor and Gu, 2014). However, first we must look at the historical background.

### Historical background

Of the many factors that have driven the rapid development of China's cultural industries – the loosening-up of policy led by the government is the most significant one. In socialist China, all cultural resources were owned by the state, cultural production and dissemination involved state investments and were carried out by the state-owned institutions. Cultural producers were the “national cadres” in the propaganda system. All activities relevant to culture were considered as having ideological and public welfare purposes. The former Chinese leader Mao Zedong once said “Policy and strategy is the life of the Party” (Mao, 1991). This unified cultural policy and strict cultural management ensured that Chinese culture was in line with the needs of the Party/Nation, and that it partially met the citizens' needs for culture. On the other hand, it caused serious problems of low vitality, inefficient production, and little variety among products and services (Shan, 2009).

In China, it was impossible to develop cultural industries without the approval of the state. In the late 1970s, the reform and opening up policy started to focus on economic reconstruction and modernization. The control of culture was loosened. The aesthetic and entertainment values of culture began gaining significance. The state no longer provided all cultural products and services to citizens, and some of the cultural institutions and enterprises had to fend for themselves. At the same time the economic value of culture became increasingly important. In April 1985 the Report of the National Bureau of Statistics on Establishing Tertiary Industry was released, which for the first time incorporated culture and broadcasting into the Tertiary Industry. In 1991, the Ministry of Culture issued a report which introduced the concept of culture as an economic entity. These all represented a new perspective on culture.

A significant transition occurred again in the early 1990s. The 14th Congress of the Communist Party in 1992 put forward a new model of the construction of a socialist market economy. Marketization swept across China, further catalyzing the economic aspects of culture. “Culture serves politics” was replaced by “culture serves economy”. In the context of economic reform and socialist market construction, concepts of culture in China underwent profound and complex change – and the concept of “cultural industries” was starting to take shape (Shan, 2009).

In 1992, the concept of “cultural industries” was first mentioned and was added as a sub division of the Ministry of Culture. The Tenth Five-Year Plan formally put forward the concept of “cultural industries”, and then the 16th National Congress of the CPC for the first time made a distinction between cultural services (provided by state supported agencies) and cultural industries. It proposed that “in developing cultural services and industry, it is imperative to meet the requirements of developing advanced culture and always put social benefits in first place”. As in developed nations in the 1980s (O'Connor, 2013) “Cultural industries” finally changed from a criticized target – reducing culture to economics – to a sector that needed to be developed. The development of cultural industries has been

pursued with a top-down, mass-mobilisation-like, scale and momentum. Discussions on cultural industries were no longer about whether to develop them, rather it was about how to enlarge and strengthen these industries. Thus a ‘cultural industries fever’ set in.

However, recognition of cultural diversity and the aspiration towards profitable cultural industries did not remove the political propaganda and ideological functions of culture. Generally, the CPC Central Committee will put forward the outline and goals of all major policies, including those for cultural industries. There then follows a top-down formulation and circulation of policy through central cultural administrative department, and further specification by local governments. By the end of 2012, there are a total of 36 official documents related to cultural industries, including strategies made by the CPC Central Committee, cultural industries' macro development policies issued by the State Council and all kinds of cultural industries policies issued by departments and ministries (Hu, 2010).

### Cultural industries policy reform to the present

There are two key priorities in these cultural reforms. First, government needs to separate commercial culture, allowed to operate relatively freely in the market, from cultural services controlled by the state. Second, that public cultural institutions operating in the commercial cultural sector should be privatized.

The first task started in the late 1980s, including transferring the role of the cultural administrative department and facilitating the separation between state cultural agencies and cultural industries. From the moment that cultural industries were separated from state cultural agencies, management has been an issue. In December 2005, the CPC Central Committee officially issued *Several Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Cultural System*. The core viewpoint was to draw a line between state cultural agencies and cultural industries, leaving space for cultural industries development and clarifying the roles of the government. That is, government needed to disengage itself from the daily running of enterprises. If cultural industries were to become a distinct economic sector, it was necessary that government withdrew from its control of the cultural industries so they could develop independently in the free market. However, the transition from ‘cultural engineering’ to ‘cultural management’ has some far-reaching ideological implications. Cultural enterprises could produce any cultural products for the market as long as they did not violate government policies. The tended to relax the authority over production at central state level and give more leeway to the everyday operations of local government.

Another consequence of government withdrawal from cultural management is that those public cultural institutions needed to transform themselves into private enterprises and become active players in the market. Since the late 1980s, many arts institutions that used to be subsidized by the government have been forced to find a way to survive in the market. Under the guidance of central authorities, those organizations have attempted to explore a few reforms. Several Ministry of Culture policies that came out during this time accelerated the reform of those

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