RED CREATIVE

Culture and Modernity in China

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Epilogue

That moment, when it was possible to doubt that China's political system could deliver a 'creative economy', has now gone. Of course, a country with 1.1 billion people, with rising incomes, a growing service sector and a push for increased domestic consumption, was always going to have a huge cultural industries sector. The Chinese firewall was not – as Bill Clinton had it – some futile nailing of Jello to the wall but provided the basis for its own distinct digital platform infrastructure. No longer able to present China with a 'transform or lose out' dilemma, the country has been efficiently absorbed into the 'rise and rise' narrative of the creative industries. In this narrative the only politics that matter are those that might impede the development of this 'industrial sector' or restrict trade and transnational collaborative ventures. This is especially important for countries, such as the United Kingdom (especially post-Brexit) and the EU and some of its member states (Germany, France, The Netherlands particularly), who are concerned to keep access to Chinese markets and welcome Chinese investment in their own projects. It is less important to the United States, still the globally pre-eminent cultural industries force, now hyper-charged by its domination of FAANG. For the United States, China is not yet a threat in terms of content – everybody agrees that Chinese soft power is pretty underwhelming even in East Asia. The problem is that China locks the United States out of its markets, especially its digital platforms; moreover, China's digital communications technologies have begun to reach into the infrastructural heartlands of the West itself.

Whilst the idea of 'soft power' kept the focus on content, the US global domination of the cultural industries relied on controlling the infrastructure – business, technological and legal. The United States controlled the cultural industries through the formation of what Timothy Mitchell called (in respect of the oil industry) a 'technological zone' – 'a set of coordinated but widely dispersed regulations, calculative arrangements, infrastructures and technical procedures that render certain objects or flows governable'.[1] To have only restricted access to the world's largest market is one thing; to feel your hold over a key global technological infrastructure weakened is something else entirely. So whilst the

Panglossian accountants of the creative industries are welcoming a new member of their global growth club, the United States have now called time-up.[2] Whatever the disquiet about the specifics of Donald Trump's trade war, it rests on a deeper bipartisan sense that China has been cheating and it no longer can be given a free ride. China has stepped into the role of opposing empire previously played by Germany and Japan in the 1930s, followed by the USSR; of economic rival to be tamed – Japan before the Plaza Accords, the European Union (and Germany) in the 1990s; and of antagonistic civilizations broken – the Middle East after the 1978 oil crisis. As a Communist geo-power, a dynamic economic rival and a radically distinct civilizational entity, China has the all the requisite elements of a super-villain.

In 1792, as his Embassy made its way to China, the teenage son of Earl Macartney's right-hand man, Sir George Staunton, began learning Chinese. The diligent Thomas Staunton acted as informal interpreter, the beginning of a long career studying China and its culture, co-founding the Royal Asiatic Society in 1923. In the famous debate on the Opium War in the House of Commons in 1840, Sir Thomas Staunton argued powerfully in favour of the war, claiming that allowing the Chinese insult of burning the Canton warehouse to stand would irreparably damage the prestige of the British Empire.[3] He can be seen as the first in a long line of Western scholar-sojourners who got to know a country's language, culture and politics close-up and first-hand, only to leave bearing a burning hatred of China and all it seems to stand for.[4] China may not be to everyone's taste; the country's long-standing culture is rarely one in which foreigners can feel completely at home perhaps, and one's *amour-propre* can suffer bruises. However, at times of tension they will be called upon to speak words of alarm. The level of anti-China rhetoric, in the Anglosphere especially, is at its highest since the aftermath of 1989. Back then though, China's economic power, and the West's entanglement with it, was nowhere near what it is today. The dominant rhetorical trope is 'waking up' – to the complacency of the political and business elites, to the dire consequence of slow drift into accommodating tyrants, and to the sleeper cells and silent invasions of the Chinese diaspora.[5] During the golden age of neo-liberalism, after the end of history, capitalism was the only route to growth, to progress, to modernity. China's rapid development could only result in its gradual entry into the global modern under the benign dominance of the United States. We are now urged to 'wake up' to the naivety of this belief; we have been duped, taken for a ride and now we must look beyond our wallets to our fundamental values, which are at stake again. What this does – what it is meant to do – is lock us down into 'our' values which are fundamentally different from 'theirs'. This is not – we are assured – an attack on the Chinese people themselves, just their government. On the seventieth anniversary of the Communist Revolution, *The Guardian* – hardly a Cold War warrior – editorialized about a regime held together by repression,

propaganda and an economic prosperity bought at 'horrific cost'. The only hope, it seemed, was a future that did not include the Communist Party.[6]

The West has learnt to talk blithely about 'regime change'. We are not against the people, just the government, they say, as if removing the Communist Party and its system would be like removing Donald Trump, or an electoral victory for a new political party. The West says 'change government' but it means a radical restructuration of the social, cultural and political fabric in the name of 'democracy', made flesh through the divine power of the market. Outside the Westphalian heartlands, it was ever thus. Under 'fundamental values', we have a whole set of economic, administrative, political and technological arrangements which are not to be questioned or touched, only exported, at gun point if necessary. 'Waking up to China' is to accept the leadership of those most willing to stand up firmly against it, and whose articulation of Western values we are to take as self-evident truths. We have been here before. Quite a few times.

In this book we have used the idea of the creative industries to sketch out two distinct narrative arcs of modernity. These two constantly intertwine and separate, in rhyme and dissonance, somehow, like polyphony, headed to what seems like the same modern ends: Progress and Growth. These two animating ideals, at least as they have been understood since the middle of the eighteenth century, are now coming to an end. Neither the West nor China as yet has any idea how to cope with this ending, or what it might mean for them. The most dysfunctional version is that of Western capitalism, its imperial dreams now focused on a new, extractive form of globalization without any of the ideals of multipolarity, diversity, multiplicity or reciprocity with which the golden age of post-history began. We have moved, as Bruno Latour put it, from Globalization Plus to Globalization Minus.[7] China, still believing in Progress and Growth, suspects that modernity can somehow overcome the challenges it has created for itself. Li Cixin has a novella that became a film – *The Wandering Earth* – in which an immanent existential threat to planet Earth from the Sun was solved by using huge propulsion engines to move the Earth out of orbit, heading for another galaxy.[8] Stopping the Earth's rotation produced tsunamis and earthquakes which destroyed half the population of the planet; many of those that remained could not be accommodated in the huge underground living spaces. The Red Engineers had saved the planet and a future humanity (if not all of the living) by the massive exercise of technology, unrestrained by any other considerations than the physical survival of the human biomass. The current government, in less drastic fashion, still looks to the growth of infrastructure, rapid urbanization, massive investment in R&D and the expansion of the economic motor as route to a modernity which is secured by, and in turn will further secure, the leading role of the Communist Party.

The relentless absorption of the sphere of culture into the system of capital accumulation accelerated in the 1990s. At the turn of the millennium, the system of symbolic exchange between producers and audiences became subject to algorithmic governance, resulting in a hyper-accelerated accumulation that could only be facilitated through extensive personal data-extraction, with surveillance its dark matter by-product. What this has done to the idea of the social and its symbolic order, the various public spheres, ideal-speech situations and the possibility of rational dialogue has become a general cause for concern.[9] This dissolution continues apace in both the West and China, but, as we tried to suggest, in different ways. The Big Other is still holding on in China, shouting evermore loudly, whilst in the West there is a deafening cacophony.

The problem with digital platforms and the algorithmic governance they facilitate is more than one of increased and evermore intrusive levels of value extraction. For those concerned about the 'social factory', there is a sense of an ongoing unequal extraction from the lifeworld into capitalist accumulation. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argued, capitalism has always been able to extract value from pre-, non-, or post-capitalist social formations.[10] However, the issue is not just that of unequal extraction and the distortion or disruption of the producers' lifeworlds this might entail. What is surely clear now is that the progressive reduction of the culture system to the logic of the commodity is deeply destructive of the social system itself. It progressively blocks the ability of that cultural activity to become knowledge. This is what Bernard Stiegler calls 'symbolic misery', and he is concerned with our collective inability to articulate our deeper need for meaning, as noetic beings.[11] The progressive dissolution of the culture system under commodification and algorithmic governance results in what he called the 'negation of knowledge itself'.[12] A form of Nihilism.

How we are to overcome the present is the urgent task. No longer can we follow Chen Duxiu's arrow into the future, the linear path of Progress. If we are to avoid the 'dark enlightenment', as articulated by reactionary 'alt-right' philosopher Nick Land in that same city of Shanghai a century later, then the rejection of Progress needs to come not with a total rejection, but a radical re-evaluation of the Enlightenment.[13] We will need to reach again for articulations of an expanded, open sense of Reason before its reduction to a mechanistic and instrumental shell.[14] The articulation of a specific modern task for art at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe, its ability to register and to 'digest' the profound shock of industrial and democratic modernity – this was art's *Weltbezug* or 'world-relevance'.[15] The 'creative industries' not only has nothing to say in the face of this pressing historical task but it has become an active obstacle to our ability to pose the question.

A different modernity will not be articulated from within Europe alone. Prasenjit Duara looked to the Asian religions and cultures arising from the Axial Age as

preserving forms of ethical reasoning which will be crucial to articulating a global sense of humanity required if we are to face climate change.[16] China's 'Confucian' heritage, we have argued, structures their society and culture in ways that are still significant, and has resources for us today. Our discussion of non-Western knowledges in early Chinese modernity suggested ways in which these non-Western knowledges attempted to negotiate a different modernity for China. These early modern Chinese negotiations have been revisited in the light of postcolonial, radical feminist and ecological thought and practice, and may still provide useful guidance for a way out of the present. More controversially perhaps, we also think that the resources of Chinese socialism, its revolutionary century, are still in play as a source of transformation. However, if change is to come in China it needs to come on its own terms, a valid member of a global community, not a country that must submit to the existing rules – increasingly centred on *fiat Americana* – or face the consequences.

Real change in China will not come from places where popular unrest rubs up against geopolitical tectonics – in Tibet or Xinjiang, Hong Kong or Taiwan. Conflicts here, at the edges of empire, are quickly taken up into the great game of rival imperialisms. Kipling's original Great Game was one of life itself, and perhaps it is challenges such as the Coronavirus epidemic which speak to this.[17] It is not so much – as in the Western media – that this outbreak 'exposes' the lack of transparency in China, or its heavy-handedness, or (this with delightful *schadenfreude*) its 'incompetence'. Perhaps it is more that in the silent cities, as the endless grind of the economic machine pauses, some space for consideration of the real foundations of 'good living', might enter in. The survival of the 'biomass' is of course a priority and we should recognize the capacity of the Chinese state, once it gets moving, along with the strong sense of social responsibility amongst the citizens who have undergone quarantine. But the silent cities, the rough treatment of many, the inability of citizens to properly communicate with the party leadership – this all brings into focus again the party's bargain to keep Chinese people safe and prosperous in return for their political quiescence. What exactly is this 'good life'?

The particular forms of meaning, knowledge and affective engagement made possible through art and culture will have to be part of such radical change. This surely is the continuing weight of the May Fourth movement on the contemporary Communist Party and the citizens it serves. The moment when an upsurge of popular culture, made possible by the arrival of the market in the space left vacant by marginalized intellectuals (*zhishifenzi*), might have helped expand the field of democracy in China has passed. To reopen a space of responsible autonomy, as a valued social space (and habitus) within everyday Chinese society will be a step forward. This would entail stepping back from the dominating rationale of economic growth as the unique source of prosperity and security for the Chinese

people. It would require an acknowledgement of another space in which questions of the good life might be posed and explored, beyond survival, beyond assuaging a century of humiliation, beyond *ganchao* ('catch-up and surpass').

There is no reason why this could not be done by a historic Communist Party, but it would need to reconnect the reality of their practice with the ideological structures through which they frame and justify their actions. The Marxism which it espouses is one that was already moribund in 1989. The CCP has sought its acceptance from the winners of the Cold War – 'look at us, we too are thoroughly modern now!' It has ignored those who sought to renew its ideologies after the collapse of the USSR, looking instead to the Red Engineers in tandem with its market economists, bearing their technologies of Progress and Growth. The CCP could open itself up to new possibilities for radical change that are daily more urgent, connecting with others across the terrestrial community also seeking such change. If it were able to do that, then it really could claim the mantle of Red Creative.

NOTES

1. T. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in The Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 40.
2. On the global growth club, cf. S. Cunningham and A. Swift, 'Creative Industries around the World', in *A Research Agenda for the Creative Industries*, ed. S. Cunningham and T. Flew (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishers, 2019), 146–63.
3. H. G. Gelber, *Opium, Soldiers and Evangelicals: Britain's 1840–42 War with China, and Its Aftermath* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 95; S. Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018), 382–89.
4. For example, Bill Bishop at the online newsletter *Sinocism* left Beijing in 2015, after various roles in finance and media, and has since become a very influential critic of the Chinese regime, which is given not a millimetre of slack. Kai Strittmatter's long sojourn as a German foreign correspondent in Beijing ended with his 2019 book titled *We Have Been Harmonised: Life in China's Surveillance State*, dripping in sarcasm, vitriol and cynicism from page one.
5. Former Australian Green candidate Clive Hamilton's 2018 book *Silent Invasion* (Hardy Grant Books) is a particularly egregious example of the new cold war paranoia.
6. *The Guardian,* 'The Guardian View on the People's Republic of China at 70: Whose History?', 30 September 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/30/the-guardian-view-on-the-peoples-republic-of-china-at-70-whose-history. Accessed 26 January 2020.
7. B. Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the new Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

8. Liu Cixin, *The Wandering Earth*, trans. H. Nahm, Kindle Edition (Beijing: Beijing Qingse Media Co., 2012). Made into a film by Frant Gwo (Dir.) (2019).
9. Cf. William Davies's review of J. E. H. Smith, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), in 'Let's Eat Badly', *London Review of Books* 41, no. 23 (2019): 19–22.
10. A. Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
11. B. Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery: Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).
12. B. Stiegler, *Automatic Society. Volume 1: The Future of Work* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 15.
13. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_Enlightenment. Accessed 26 January 2020. Nick Land is based in Shanghai. A version of 'dark enlightenment' makes an appearance as 'Shanghai Gothic' in the chapter of that same name in A. Greenspan, *Shanghai Future: Modernity Remade* (London: Hurst and Co., 2014).
14. The notion of a radical enlightenment can be found in Arran Gare, 'The Arts and Radical Enlightenment. Gaining Liberty to Save the Planet', *The Structurist* 47/48 (2007/08): 20–27. We look forward to its further elaboration in the work of his student, N. Trimarchi, *The Meaning Value of Art: Art as a Science of Meaning and Valuing* (Ph.D. thesis, Swinburne University, forthcoming).
15. Also translated as 'art's appropriate relation to the world'. S. Olma, *Autonomy and Weltbezug: Towards an Aesthetic of Performative Defiance* (Breda: Avans Hogeschool, 2016).
16. P. Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
17. Tim Michell (*Carbon Democracy,* 52) makes this point.

RED CREATIVE

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Red Creative is an exploration of China's cultural economy over the last twenty years, particularly through the lens of its creative hub of Shanghai. The research presented here raises questions about the nature of contemporary 'creative' capitalism and the universal claims of Western modernity, offering new ways of thinking about cultural policy in China.

Taking a long-term historical perspective, Justin O'Connor and Xin Gu analyse the ongoing development of China's cultural industries, examining the institutions, regulations, interests and markets that underpin the Chinese cultural economy and the strategic position of Shanghai within it. Further, the authors explore cultural policy reforms in post-colonial China and articulate Shanghai's significance in paving China's path to modernity and entry to global capitalism. In-depth and illuminating, *Red Creative* carefully situates China's contemporary cultural economy in its larger global and historical context, revealing the limits of Western thought in understanding Chinese history, culture and society.

Justin O'Connor is professor of cultural economy at the University of South Australia and visiting chair in the Department of Cultural Management at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China. He is the coeditor of many books, most recently *Cultural Industries in Shanghai: Policy and Planning inside a Global City*, also published by Intellect. **Xin Gu** is a senior lecturer in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. She is the coeditor of many books and special issues, including *Re-imagining Creative Cities in Twenty-First Century Asia*.

"Red Creative *is a stunning piece of synthetic scholarship. It's an essential overview of the limitations of major bodies of Western thought in understanding Chinese history, culture and society, especially the ways concepts of culture and creativity have been mobilized in China over the last twenty years.*"

David Hesmondhalgh, Professor of Media, Music and Culture, University of Leeds

"*The book's scope is as remarkable as its depth. It presents an authoritative view of contemporary Chinese cultural policy and the development of the creative industries approach/agenda in China and the Asian region generally [...] It is a carefully crafted, fully-researched analysis and assessment of a culture often treated as an object of fantasy by Western intellectuals.*"

Julian Meyrick, Professor of Creative Arts, Griffith University

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