

# Chinese performing arts: from communist to globalised kitsch

While Chinese authorities closely monitor artists, artistic venues and performances, they give free rein to commercial culture as long as stability, prosperity and consumerism are sustained. The result, given China's blistering urban economic growth, is that commercial pressure, more than government restriction, determines the conditions of cultural production and export. This has led to a kind of mass production of the art and culture the state approves of and a snuffing out of what it does not. This is how Chinese communist kitsch has transformed into a kitsch of globalised capitalism.



Dragan Klaić

The Chinese economic boom is what interests most foreign observers, politicians and investors. They know much less about shifts in cultural production and distribution, though state control over freedom of expression is the most frequently discussed topic. Google, for example, has been criticised by its users for bowing to China's restrictions on links to 'sensitive' websites, while last year's ban on the performance of the Chinese-language version of *The Vagina Monologues* in Shanghai struck some as an intervention of old-fashioned prudishness. Such incidents attract international attention, but they also trivialise the complex circumstances and changes in cultural policy that remain hidden from public scrutiny.

## A tsunami of commercialism

Government control over culture remains oblique, unsystematic and unpredictable, yet censorship is not the main impediment to artistic develop-

ment. Commercial pressure is more detrimental and threatens to curb artistic innovation, harm cultural heritage and favour the production and export of a limited range of uniform cultural goods in place of multifaceted forms of international cultural cooperation. The capitalist frenzy, with its thousands of construction sites, ugly office buildings and shopping centres, rules the Beijing urban landscape. Ostentatious advertising is a ubiquitous eyesore, as though communist kitsch has been smoothly transformed into an equally ghastly capitalist sort. Popular commercial culture imagery, chiefly Japanese and American, dominates the public space.

Less visible are all the government bodies that have established their own companies for cultural production, distribution and mediation. Many government-subsidised cultural organisations behave like commercial enterprises or have created for-profit business units. Artists, managers, teachers and researchers, as well as present or former government and party functionaries, have also established their own commercial companies; with an unabashed hard-sell rhetoric of hyperbole, they offer services in event management, program development, art export, the presentation of foreign works and even ways to circumvent the bureaucratic stranglehold on licensing.

## Licensed to death

The entrepreneurial climate has affected the arts, but those effects and the arts themselves remain under an oppressive cloud of restrictions and controls. For example, all performing arts venues must be licensed, and productions coming from abroad, from the provinces or authored by unofficial companies operating in Beijing require additional licensing as well. While government authorisations to perform might not be immediately denied, they are not always issued or are repeatedly postponed. For international work, local presenters must submit Chinese translations of the script, videotape, photographs and reviews three months before a scheduled performance, then arrange all logistics not only at great expense but without any guarantee that a licence will be issued in time. Informal ways to speed up, circumvent, or otherwise expedite the approval process seem to exist, but for productions not based on a play, such as dance or movement pieces or for international co-productions with Chinese artists, these obscure, heavy-handed government review procedures can be insurmountable.

In principle, one cannot sell tickets for an unlicensed show or for a show at an unlicensed venue. Informal companies that temporarily claim or 'squat' a performance space and produce low-key performances for small audiences

risk being banned but are sometimes allowed to carry on for a few evenings. Foreign embassies, whose cultural departments occasionally bring artists from abroad to work with Chinese peers outside state institutions, complain of the bureaucratic labyrinths but are reluctant to trespass the ambiguous limits of an expanding grey area of creativity that is neither explicitly banned nor permitted. Yet it is precisely in that realm where radical and innovative Chinese artists dwell, testing the boundaries of the possible and expanding the zone of experimentation.

Besides 'unlicensed' events in abandoned factories and construction sites, rare site-specific performances, even on crowded pedestrian overpasses and normally busy roads, are occasionally licensed. Audiences gather mainly thanks to information communicated only by popular websites, text messages or word of mouth. Otherwise scarce media attention might signal more interest for prestigious and commercial programmes, but occasionally it's the result of a government effort to marginalise a 'sensitive' production into anonymity. Meanwhile, some unlicensed performances, that manage to see the light of day, (in fact they tend to happen at night), and reach the public are clearly the work of small cohorts of colleagues and friends. Thus ten years after the founding of the Beijing Modern Dance Company, contemporary dance is still in a pioneering phase and, even in this enormous city, attracts a minuscule audience as it takes place in a shabby cultural centre on the periphery.

## Cultural prostitution


While the authorities seem eager to keep tabs on artists, spaces and audiences, much of their controlling impulse is probably topical. Capitalism ushered in the freedom of entrepreneurship. Along with it came the a new tolerance for traditional religious expression after decades of officially imposed atheism. Today some worshippers insist on praying in public while prostrate or kneeling and offer sacrifices in Confucian temples, such as big plastic bottles of cooking oil and thousands of red notebooks that attest to parental wishes for their children's academic success. Whole districts around shrines thrive on the sale of religious paraphernalia. This business is tolerated, but government is worried. It sees a surge in religion as a challenge to the Communist party ideological monopoly; thus the topic of religion is not allowed on the stage and neither are references to recent events in China's history that could cast the Communist party record in a negative light. Pornography, however, is allowed to run rampant, spawning a growing number of 'adult' stores that no longer need to disguise themselves as foot and body massage parlours. Again,

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this is tolerated as small business, but it would never be allowed to become subject matter for a theatre production. Commercial impulses are allowed and even encouraged, but works of art must not challenge official ideological tenets. Art is expected to refrain from any social critique and cannot be allowed to expose the gap between the official communist line and the thriving capitalist reality that includes some problematic features, such as prostitution, pornography and a rapid stratification of the society.

Shanghai observers tell of sudden cancellations and postponements of various cultural initiatives since early 2006. This is probably as a result of a silent political purge, culminating in the autumn of 2006 with the arrest of the Party boss of Shanghai and many of his cronies for siphoning municipal social security funds. That this political upheaval blocked cultural production is another indication of how much the arts remain under government control and how much international cultural cooperation remains dependent on tacit official support. Now, the Shanghai power infrastructure needs to be reconsolidated before the flow of cultural production and ambitious international programming can start again.

The Chinese-European Performing Arts Meeting in Beijing, organised in October 2006 by the Informal European Theatre Meetings (IETM) network ([www.ietm.org](http://www.ietm.org)), allowed European theatre and dance professionals to look behind the ornate but clichéd décor of the Chinese stage and explore its systemic features, grasp its socio-economic and political environment, examine the diversity of its creative work, and understand artists' motivations, aspirations, limitations and frustrations. European and Chinese professionals talked about their work and questioned each other's position and priorities.

The Chinese participants kept asking their European colleagues: which cultural products interest Europeans? What kind of artistic export would be a success? This frequent question implies the readiness of hosts to deliver it all: Chinese acrobatics, circus, Kung Fu musicals, traditional Beijing opera (in a compressed, more easily digested form), folk dances, traditional orchestras, even Western classical music. The same driven, lightning-quick acumen that produces millions of shoes of Italian-like quality at a fraction of the cost

is being unleashed in cultural production. Because the government subsidises mainly prestigious, traditional cultural institutions (such as the National Theatre and the National Symphonic Orchestra), and invests little in artistic development, the current generation of young artists is left at the mercy of market forces and standards set by the globalised culture industry. They are pushed into serial production – originality, innovation, artistic integrity and vision carry much less leverage and are trampled in the rush toward profit.



Museums are jazzed up to resemble theme parks, to peddle 'antiquity' to tourists and fleece them with souvenirs, while cultural heritage renovation is carried out carelessly, because time is money and money needs to be made fast. One year before the 2008 Olympics a ban on new construction will come into force to spare the city from more dust and rubbish and help make it look clean and tidy. Meanwhile, the provincial authorities and some richer cities want to follow Beijing and Shanghai's cultural lead: they dream of their own theme parks and prestigious spectacular mass events, willing to invest in the acquisition of top stars from abroad, like Madonna.

### Mass cultural production

In a city as big as Beijing there is not much official interest in small-scale cultural infrastructure that will serve artistic development. For example, Factory 798 on the north-east periphery was originally an artistic squat but now boasts over 200 galleries, some exquisite cafés and restaurants and a small, well-equipped contemporary dance space. The complex thrives on the growing demand from rich Chinese for Chinese art and on the foreign market hyped by international dealers and curators. Worse, a corporation, with government complicity, could take over the complex, make it even trendier and more commercial. In music, performing arts, photography, video, film and literature the same commercial impulses and corporate approaches loom.

Thus the public interest and artists' interests are subject to corporate powers that often collude with government bodies and functionaries. The Central Academy of Drama Theatre, recently renovated and well equipped with classrooms and studios, several venues, a dorm and a canteen, caters to 2,000 students who enjoy excellent facilities. But these students must pay 1,000-2,000

euros, (and as much as 20,000 euros for a masters degree), to cover yearly tuition fees and their cost of living. The state subsidy has been increased several times in recent years but the tuition is being charged nevertheless – a common phenomenon everywhere in China, making the concept of free education obsolete, even in elementary and secondary education. Siemens and other European companies donated expensive sound and light equipment to the Academy, obviously banking on students becoming loyal customers in their professional career, but some teachers have set up factories at the outskirts of Beijing and are churning out unlicensed copies of the same stage gadgetry. In two years the Academy will move to a huge new campus with even better facilities, some 70 kilometres outside of Beijing, where a new generation of artists might be protected from commercial pressures, but they will also be detached from the inspirations and challenges of the metropolis with its huge contrasts of old and new, rich and poor, traditional and fashionable.

Not that this concerns the state. In fact, at this point, true artistic development isn't even on the state's agenda. With the Olympics approaching, the government is interested primarily in continued prosperity and consumerism, unperturbed stability and culture as a representation of ideology, national glory and successful modernisation. In the meantime, the for-profit culture industry can be as imitative as it chooses, while true creativity struggles between market pressures and state cultural policy. ◀

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