‘Spring Up Like Mushrooms’
The burgeoning growth of China’s performing arts centres

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Abstract
This paper discusses the development of new performing arts centers in China and how this development is informed by the changes in China’s socio-economic policies over the past 60 years with reference to cultural policy and in particular the performing arts

Biography
Luqiang Qiao, is the Deputy Director of the General Office at China’s National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing. He has been involved in several cultural exchanges between Australia and China. In 2009 he was awarded the title of Australian Cultural Alumni of the year in China and is a graduate of the University of South Australia’s arts management program. He has toured extensively internationally with various cultural groups from China. Between 2003-2005 Qiao was visiting Professor at Beijing University’s Arts Management Program.
Introduction

China is presently experiencing a most interesting historical period in terms of cultural reform and is undertaking tremendous changes in cultural policy, especially in the performing arts field. Together with a booming economy, it seems that the creative industries in China are booming too. However, does the phenomenon of ‘spring up like mushrooms’ referring to the growth of the luxury and large-scaled grand theatres, opera houses and arts centers throughout China, really indicate prosperity in the performing arts?

The rapid building of these centers raises many interesting questions. For instance, where is the balance point between the creation of tangible spaces (arts centers) and that of intangible spaces (new arts productions)? When reviewing the previous 60 years of reforms in the performing arts in new China’s history, how do we assess whether the present ongoing reform in performing arts policy, is a success or not? For example the opening of China’s National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in December 2007 was like ‘a stone tossed into the water raising a thousand ripples’, as it restructured the performing arts market in China over-night. The creation of the NCPA significantly reduced and changed the business of many other theatres and concert halls in Beijing. For the other venues to survive, they had to reorient their productions particularly. They did this primarily by lowering the quality of their productions, as most of the high-level productions now go to the NCPA. In addition it raises the question of whether an entity such as the NCPA can establish a unique operation system and management model with Chinese characteristics or will it by necessity follow a western arts management model?

A Brief Introduction to the History of Chinese Performing Arts Reform over the past 60 Years.

Chinese performing arts reform underwent two different major periods: 1949-1978 and 1978-present. Within these periods there were significant events that influenced development such as the Cultural Revolution from the mid 60s to the mid 70s. This section will introduce the contents of the reforms, analyze their characteristics and discuss the output of the reforms.

The Years from 1949 – 1978, after the new China was established.

In the 1950s, China’s new government restructured the arts troupes and established the New China’s cultural system. This meant that:

1. The arts troupes belonging to the Communist Party before 1949 still remained and had state-owned status under the Cultural Ministry of China and in each province.
2. Some of the private-owned arts troupes before 1949 were restructured and were turned into stated-owned professional art troupes under the different levels of governments. By these actions, there were no private-owned arts troupes existing in China.
3. The Government established brand new state-owned professional arts troupes under the different levels of governments according to their perceived requirements.
What does a ‘State owned arts troupe’ mean?

- Government provides all the funding to the troupe, including salaries, welfare, cost of productions and so on.
- The copyright of the production belongs to the troupe, which means however, belonging to government.
- Government has a lot of say or influence on arts creation

Advantages of this state-owned system meant that:

- The artists have no worries about their salary and can concentrate all their mind and talents on arts production.
- The state owned status raises the dignity of artists and the profession because they are recognized as valuable and contributing to China’s culture and deserving of being supported by the government. The artists are equal to the people in other fields.

Disadvantages of this state-owned system meant that:

- Government controlled almost everything including the freedom of the artists and the freedom of arts creation
- Artists may get lazy in creation
- There is an ‘Iron Bowl’\(^1\) approach with equal salaries no matter whether you contribute more or less, thus there is no incentive to advance or work harder.
- As both arts and artists were used as tools for political propaganda, arguably very little real arts creation occurred.

From the mid 60s to 1976: the Cultural Revolution

In the period of Cultural Revolution, the arts were fully used and promoted as political tools. Many art troupes closed and the surviving troupes just copied the productions of the troupes in Beijing in particular. *The Eight Examples Productions* by Jiang Qing, First Lady of China at that time, was a major case in point.

The period from 1978 to present.

The first phase from 1978 to 1983: Social and political background

1. China Opened its doors to the world
2. The Chinese Communist Party officially confessed the terrible mistakes they made in the Cultural Revolution period and asked the people forgive it.
3. The government turned the key work of the country from Political Struggle to the development of Economic Reform (as the Chinese Economy was on the verge of collapse).

\(^1\) ‘Iron Bowl’ means that once you are employed by government as a staff or artist in a state-owned arts troupe, you never lose the job till you die.
The Intent of the New Performing Arts Policies

- To reduce the government control on the arts troupes. Arts troupes had more possibilities to make decisions for themselves, in both organising performances and in arts creation.
- There were big changes in the method of subsidies to the arts troupes: a contract system with government was introduced.
- By the first half of 1985, two thirds of the professional art troupes had set up a contract system with government.

Advantages of the new policies:

- Strongly stimulated the motivation of arts creation
- More freedom was allowed in arts creation
- Raised the income of the artists and improved their living standard
- The 'Iron Bowl' started to be broken.

The second phase from 1984 to 1992: Social and Political Background

- Communist Party and the State’s key work turned from the countryside to the cities.
- Business and the market economy got stronger.

The Government pointed out five problems in the performing arts. These were:

1. The structure and management of the performing arts troupes was not adequate or professional enough.
2. The troupes were overstaffed and too big.
3. The leadership and management did not support the arts production and creation
4. The ‘Iron Bowl’ was not yet fully broken: the allocation of income was still unfair
5. The existing system was not positive for arts creation

So the Government introduced new policies for the Performing Arts. These included:

- A dual-track system: both government and the private sector contracting with the troupes.
- The establishment of a position of an Artistic Director
- More artistic freedom available to the art troupes because of the indirect control by government
- Major reform in HR policy: staff can be employed by contract in troupes
- Private arts troupes (non government owned) appear again.

From 1993 to 1999: Social and Political Background

1. Deng Xiaoping released an important political speech which opened the door wider to the world and further deepened the reform in the economy by announcing the ‘establishment of the socialist market economy’ - the whole of China turned into a more market driven economy.
2. Within this political, social and economic reform the Cultural Ministry of China accelerated the reform of the cultural system by raising the new requirements for the reforms: new structures, leadership, management, operation, finance management, salary management, funding management, HR management, performance management and new production management.
New Policies:

- Decision to break the ‘Iron Bowl’ of government in subsidies
- Merging of the troupes from 13 to 10 troupes under the Cultural Ministry of China
- Further reform in HR and employment policy; this meant there was real competition for jobs and some of those employed lost their jobs.

Companies were subsidised by the number of performances given:

- Peking Opera: 90 p/y, each performance subsided 5700 CHY
- Drama: 90 p/y, each performance subsided 5300 CHY
- Song and dance: 150 p/y, each performance subsided 9500

The fourth phase from 2000 to 2002: Social and Political Background

1. The concept of a ‘Cultural Industry’ first appeared in China
2. Realisation that ‘Culture’ could make money for state and for artists
3. Realisation that we can operate ‘Culture’ as an ‘Industry’
4. The development of a business economy and a market economy moving very fast (booming). However, the reform in culture went slowly and sometimes it appeared to go backwards.

New Cultural Policies:

- To turn the performing art troupes into companies
- To manage the art troupes as companies
- To dramatically reduce the amount of government subsidy to the arts troupes.

Some achievements were made but not enough. The New Policies aroused many conflicting and serious debates within the sector. However, despite strong resistance from many administrators and artists, the reform has continued but slowly.

The fifth phase from 2002 to the present day: Social and Political Background

1. The Central Government calls on the arts troupes and artists to push ‘fast to develop the cultural industry and further deepen the reform of the cultural system’.
2. The Central Government calls on the whole society to fully understand the necessity and the importance of the cultural reform.
3. If the reform fails this time, it is suggested that it may threaten the cultural security of China.
4. Privately-owned art troupes appear very fast and as some of them are well-managed and well-operated, they take over a large proportion of the market
5. Funding for culture still increases within the state budget.

New Policies:

- continue merging to reduce the number of the troupes supported by government
- encourage the big enterprises to set up their own arts troupes (separate from government)
- encourage private individuals to establish their own private arts companies
• encourage state owned art troupes to operate as a company by reducing their government subsidies and by increasing their box-office income and fundraising
• encourage state owned art troupes to have closer collaborations with tourism

In order to effectively push the reform forward, the government announces the Roadmap and Timetable of the reform.

Timetable: before end of 2009
Roadmap: Finalisation of 42 listed state owned troupes into companies.

Of the 42 troupes, there is at least one troupe in the capital city of each province (except Xinjiang and Tebat) that must be turned into a company.

The art forms are limited to song and dance, acrobatics, Quyi, drama and folk opera. The reform will go further and wider to other cities within each province in 2010.

The 42 troupes are:
• Hebei Acrobatic Troupe
• Shanxi Song and Dance Theatre
• Inner Mongolian Acrobatic Troupe
• Jilin Quyi Group
• Jilin Song and Dance Theatre
• Heilongjiang Acrobatic Troupe Shanghai Acrobatic Troupe
• Shanghai Song and Dance Theatre
• Shanghai Comic Theatre
• 16 acrobatic troupes
• 14 song and dance theatres
• 2 Quyi troupes
• 5 drama theatres
• 1 comic theatre
• 2 puppet troupes
• 1 pop music band
• 1 symphony orchestra

The Reform in the Cultural System is highly emphasised in the Communiqué of the Fifth Plenum of the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The Fifth Plenum of the 17th CPC Central Committee was held in Beijing from October 15 to 18, 2010 and the Communiqué was passed on October 18th when the Plenum was completed. The meeting examined and approved proposals for formulating the nation’s next Five-Year Plan, commencing in 2010. The Communiqué includes a whole paragraph about the importance of culture and the need to deepen the reform in the cultural system for the future development of China. It is the first time in China’s history that the reform in the cultural system is so highly emphasised in such a high-leveled political meeting. From this, it can be seen that the reform of the cultural system will play a key role in boosting cultural undertakings and the direction of the cultural industry in China.
The new arts centers

In China there has been more than 20 new large scale opera houses and multi-purpose arts centers built over the past five years. Some say these have been ‘springing up like mushrooms’. In Table 1 these arts centers are reviewed in the context of their location, investment, seating capacity, population and architect. As it can be seen the most expensive one so far has been the National Center for Performing Arts (NCPA) in Beijing (3,300,000,000 RMB). However Shanghai has built three for a total cost that is likely to be greater than the one in Beijing. Nevertheless all of them have cost a large amount of money to build which is significant in a country where the average income is low. Out of a total of 20, less than 50% (8) are designed by Chinese architects. Hence much of the design input and expertise has been from western countries. Apart from the Penglai Grand Theatre and the Yantai Arts Centre both in Shandong Province, most of the arts centers will have a seating capacity of more than 2000. The large capacity of these centers will then influence what kinds of performance can occur. All of these arts centers are located in large population areas by western standards with perhaps the exception of the Penglai Grand Theatre (where the population is noted as less than a million).

Table 1. New Performing Arts Centres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facility</th>
<th>Investments 100 million RMB</th>
<th>Capacity</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Pop. million</th>
<th>Designer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nat.Centre Performing Arts</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5600</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>French</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chongqing Grand Theatre</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3080</td>
<td>Chongqing SiChuan Province</td>
<td>31.44</td>
<td>German</td>
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<td>Shanghai Oriental Art Centre</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>3301</td>
<td>Pudong Shaghai</td>
<td>19.27</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai Cultural Plaza</td>
<td>no data</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Shanghai - world’s largest &amp;</td>
<td>19.27</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>deepest u/ground theatre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai Expo Performing Arts Centre</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>19.27</td>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guangzhou Opera House</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2200</td>
<td>Guangzhou Guangdong Province</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>UK</td>
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<tr>
<td>DongGuan Grand Theatre</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>DongGuan Guandong Province</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shenzhen Concert Hall</td>
<td>7.76</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Shenzhen, Guangong Province</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shenzhen Opera House</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1555</td>
<td>Shenzhen, Guangong Province</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>China non-gov. invest</td>
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<td>Huizhou Arts Centre</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2168</td>
<td>Guangdong Province</td>
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<td>Qingtai Grand Theatre</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2200</td>
<td>Wuhan, Hubei Province</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henan Arts Centre</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2900</td>
<td>Zhengzhou, Henan Province</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>China</td>
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<td>Hangzhou Grand Theatre</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2600</td>
<td>Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>China</td>
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<td>Ningbo Grand Theatre</td>
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<td>NingBo Zhejiang</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Jiangsu</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>&amp; 4 cinemas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XiongDa Grand Theatre</td>
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<td>no data</td>
<td>Kunming Yunnan Province</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>concept only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folk Operas</td>
<td>(built only for all kinds of Chinese Folk Operas)</td>
<td></td>
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What are the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of development to the arts and cultural industry?

Certainly the rapid construction of these large-scaled arts centers has provoked debate in both the arts community and in the general community about the necessity of these large arts centers. On the positive side it could be said that their creation reflects the fast development of the economy in China leading to an assumption that the cultural industry should develop as fast in parallel. Another view is that the construction of these arts centers now is a good way to show that China is getting rich and strong. They also suggest that China is approaching another reinvigoration of its culture in history. These arts centers are then seen as the necessary infrastructure for the prosperity of culture for the future. They will provide more opportunities for Chinese people to appreciate classical arts and will play a key role in improving the national cultural standards. These arts centre then are built for the future of the China. So to summarise, the advantage for China of the building of these arts centers demonstrates that:

- China as a country is getting stronger and richer
- Building a future for the performing arts
- Providing more opportunities for Chinese people to appreciate the classic arts

However, on the negative side, it is said that many other sectors in the economy other than the arts, need more money for stable and fast development. It is not a good decision then to spend so much money on arts facilities in this developing period. If we build these arts centers at a later, more appropriate time, the money is likely to be used more reasonably and effectively. As noted above, the majority of these centers are designed and built by overseas architects, therefore not necessarily reflecting Chinese needs or aesthetics. When so many arts centres are built in such a short period, there is a gap between the number of arts venues and arts productions available to go in them. In this period of development, government should put more money into arts creation and new production first. There is the possibility that most of the time these arts centers will be kept in the dark because there are not enough performances. Furthermore these newly built arts centers will force many existing theatres into a difficult financial situation. To manage this they may have to put on movies acting like a cinema and rent the public areas of their theatres as shops. The phenomena of the ‘spring up like mushrooms’ with the luxurious and large-scale grand theatres in big cities and provinces, is possible considered a political contest between local politicians rather than reflecting a need in the community.

So to summarise, the disadvantages for China of the building of these arts centers demonstrate that:

- Mostly designed by foreigners without any Chinese style and characteristics.
- Generally all large-scale buildings which are expensive to build, clean and maintain.
- Consume large amounts of energy with no consideration of their environmental impact.
- China is still not a very wealthy country and many of its people still live in poverty. Should so much money be spent on this kind of high end arts centers?
- There are not enough arts productions and performances for these venues, therefore most of the time they will be closed.
- The price of the tickets is too high, which also impacts on there being not enough audiences.

Many existing older theatres and opera houses have had to turn to retail activities to survive (shops and cinemas).
Conclusion
Over the past 60 years China has witnessed major changes in the performing arts sector. This change continues and the outcomes of it in the longer term are yet to be determined. However it is clear that while the intention by government is to modernise the sector within the current paradigm of an industry, there is a disconnection between the actions of constructing, in this case, large performing arts centers, and their long term cost effectiveness for the community. On the one hand the cultural sector is being given major capital resources and treated seriously at the political level in the policy directives; on the other hand there may be a waste of expenditure on facilities that cannot be used effectively for either the presentation of performing arts or by the community in which they reside.

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