

# Introduction

Michel Hockx and Julia Strauss

This collection offers a variety of perspectives on culture in contemporary China. We begin and end with pieces by Jing Wang and Deborah Davis on the production and consumption of culture in general, before moving on to three specific areas: visual culture, music and poetry. Jing Wang's opening piece on "bourgeois bohemians" (bobos) in China revolves around the all-important question of how taste is constructed and a multiplicity of lifestyles imagined. In China as elsewhere in the world, lifestyles are first imagined and transmitted through advertising. Wang describes how marketing campaigns propagate idealized lifestyles to different segments of China's self identified urban middle class; notably the bohemian and the *xin xin renlei*. Deborah Davis focuses on the consumption end of culture, suggesting that for all the real resentments and worries engendered by growing income inequality and job insecurity, urbanites in Shanghai experience consumer culture and the pursuit of individual taste and comfort in the home through shopping to be positive experiences, particularly when juxtaposed against the deprivations of the past. Both Wang and Davis show that the production and consumption of culture are complex phenomena that go beyond mere market manipulation. There is substantial agency involved, from urbanites joyfully participating in redecoration of their flats to the ways in which niche segments of the urban middle class separate into different "tribes."

The Braester, Denton and Finnane essays focus on different aspects of the production and consumption of visual culture: film, museums and fashion. Braester suggests that one cannot sharply differentiate commercial film from art film on the basis of content or aesthetics, as directors previously known for making art films move into commercials, and both share similar sensibilities. Braester develops the concept of cultural broker by focusing on the emerging interplay between entrepreneurial "players" (*dawan'r*) in film and their overlap with "bigshots" in other commercial realms, particularly real estate, to suggest that film, use of space and commerce in contemporary China are in a dynamic nexus between image making, market shaping and cultural identification.

The Denton piece on the evolution of contemporary museum culture probes the changes in the ways in which the state orders and legitimates its own core values through a three-dimensional form of visual culture: museums as sites of both entertainment and instruction. Here we see that a new aesthetics of space, minimalist architecture, the use of models rather than "real" historical objects and jazzy interactive sites have replaced straightforward chronologies of suffering, sacrifice and state-led development. Yet even in its replacement of heavy handed chronological narratives with lighter, thematic exhibits, the state continues to propagate a new ideology of entrepreneurship, hard work, commerce and continued economic reform.

© The China Quarterly, 2005

The Finnane piece on fashion and clothing spans the realm between the visual (the catwalk and high fashion as a show) and material (everyone has to wear clothes, and what is available to wear has changed dramatically in the past 30 years in China). Here we see a range of perhaps surprising continuities from the 1920s to the present. In terms of spatial ordering, the key nodes for the production and consumption of fashion stand unchanged with the big three of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, while Chinese designers have long and only partially successfully searched to combine a form of dress both “authentically Chinese” with acclaim and recognition by the big names in international couture.

The articles on music by De Kloet and Harris include what one might consider polar opposites within contemporary music: the alternative rock scene in Beijing, and Uyghur pop in the city and countryside of Xinjiang. Yet surprising similarities crop up, despite wild differences in musical language, propagation and consumption; both are flourishing and adapting international trends in music culture in innovative ways. De Kloet argues that the alternate rock scene in Beijing has moved beyond the *liumang* hoodlum chic of the late 1980s and early 1990s to differentiate into different sub-genres: fashionable, political and nostalgic-folk. Each of these sub-genres in turn has been influenced by the wide availability of cheap *dakou* CDs supposed to have been destroyed in the West that have ended up on the Chinese market. Harris’s exploration of trends in Uyghur pop music show how a variety of musical influences, from the West, Beijing, Russia, Central Asia and Pakistan, are in the process of being absorbed into Uyghur pop themes and musical practice, leading to such seemingly strange juxtapositions as Uyghur musicians as imagined Western cowboys, strumming traditional instruments to a reggae beat.

Finally, the van Crevel and Hockx articles both consider a form of cultural production and consumption that, unlike the others considered here, normally presents itself as being almost entirely without economic benefit and independent of market “rules”: poetry. While Van Crevel focuses on print media and Hockx on web-based poetry sites, both demonstrate that the contemporary poetry scene in China is thriving and adapting well to new technologies and forms of dissemination over the internet, despite the widespread perception that contemporary poetry is either totally marginal or in crisis. Van Crevel juxtaposes an “official” political lyricism with the unofficial avant-garde, starkly illustrating how different the two are, before going on to elaborate four different trends in contemporary avant-garde poetry, informed by poets’ own responses through metatextual representations of themselves. Hockx compares online poetry communities in the United States and the People’s Republic of China. Despite the obvious technological similarities between the two, he finds that there is indeed such a thing as PRC web culture. Web moderators have taken on both editorial and censorship functions, and web literature in China has a surprising set of links to print culture; unlike the United States, web-based literature often makes the leap into print, with its own specially designated section in bookstores.

*Making Sense of Contemporary Culture in the People's Republic of China: State, Market and Internationalization*

When commissioning the papers we suggested that our contributors consider three issues common to all areas involved, linking the contents of this volume to debates more commonly encountered in *The China Quarterly*: the changing role of the state, the increasing importance of the market and globalization. During the course of the conference, a fourth, even more important, theme emerged that cut across all of the articles: the role of cultural producers as gatekeepers, brokers and taste makers.

*The changing role of the state.* Throughout the Mao era, mainland Chinese cultural products were, by definition, state products. Mao-era culture is normally associated with monotony and uniformity, epitomized in the field of fashion by an actual uniform, the Mao suit. At the same time, however, the debates and power struggles within the Communist Party, leading to endless campaigns and purges among cultural workers, were anything but monotonous, and naturally occupied most of the scholarly interest in culture at this time. In Mao's China, cultural workers fortunate enough to be assigned a role in state production (and state propaganda) had advantages as well. Many had a guaranteed state income, a guaranteed audience of unprecedented size, as well as considerable social and political status. Naturally, all these advantages needed to be balanced against the constant threat of being purged, the need to pre-empt the requirements of censorship and, more generally, the psychological pressure of experiencing a lack of freedom of expression.

During the early post-Mao years cultural workers, especially avant-garde artists, poets and filmmakers, found themselves in a new and unusual position. They were granted considerably more liberties by the Deng regime, including increased access to and exchange with cultural trends outside China, yet their use of these liberties often continued to be interpreted, both by the communist regime and by foreign observers, as a political stance of dissidence. These were the days of what Jing Wang has called the "high culture fever" of the 1980s, with cultural producers, critics and theorists in all fields and genres looking for cultural answers to the question of what caused the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, enjoying unprecedented levels of independence and prominence within what was still essentially a state system. The cultural products of these "dissidents" appeared almost without exception in state-run publications or were made in state-run companies. The state and intellectuals found each other in a new, often uneasy relationship, eliminating many of the earlier disadvantages of being involved in cultural work while maintaining many of the advantages.

In the aftermath of the violent crackdown on the people's movement of 1989, the exodus of "dissidents" to the West and the radical reform of the state sector changed the cultural landscape in China almost beyond recognition, at least from a Chinese perspective. Cultural activity was

marginalized in terms of social and political importance as both the state and a new generation of cultural workers lost interest in its potential for dissidence. The state adopted a much more straightforward approach to censorship, focusing more on popular culture and the mass media and no longer bothering with trying to read possibly subversive messages into obscure poems. As a result, a much more complex cultural sphere has emerged that resembles that of societies elsewhere: with the old guarantees of subsistence and captive audiences gone, the process of marketization has pushed at least some forms of high culture and indeed the very subsistence for old-style cultural workers themselves to the margin. Not surprisingly, China's cultural intellectuals, particularly those in their 50s and 60s, often perceive this situation as a form of loss: they are delighted that more freedom of expression has been gained, but sad that the prominent position of cultural intellectuals in society and politics has been eroded. Anxieties about the role of *wenren* (literati) or *zhishi fenzi* (intellectuals) in society dating back to at least the late imperial period have once again forcefully emerged, leading to a variety of responses, including, paradoxically, that of melancholy for the state-controlled system.

All articles in this collection provide evidence of the changes brought about in these different cultural sectors. Yet the authors either implicitly or explicitly caution against such crude dichotomies as a state necessarily in "retreat" before the onslaught of homogenizing market forces. As the Denton piece on museum culture clearly shows, the Chinese state is itself in a process of transformation and articulation of new ideologies such as marketization and entrepreneurialism, and retains a good deal of capacity in framing and shaping the realm of cultural production and consumption. And Rachel Harris on Uyghur popular music illustrates that direct state censorship of well-known musicians in a politically sensitive area such as Xinjiang goes far beyond what would find in other areas: what is tolerated for the avant-garde rocker in Beijing is quite another thing for the popular Uyghur crooner.

*Marketization.* As Party and state have shed their old functions of both supporting and suppressing cultural expression, many of these functions are gradually being taken over by the market. The most significant added benefit of this is of course that "suppression" by market forces does not involve political persecution. The main drawback, at least for some cultural workers, is their perception of the marginalization of high culture and its attendant loss of status. But the market has also brought about opportunities and positive changes in the cultural realm. First and foremost, the emergence of a fast-growing market economy in the PRC has led to a huge increase in consumer-oriented and profit-oriented cultural expression, such as pop music, television and advertising. Nor has the emergence of markets spelled the definitive end of all high culture: the Shanghai music conservatory fills its concert hall nearly every night, international troupes bring experimental productions of established ballets to China's major cities, and cable television maintains

channels specifically designated for youth music culture and classical symphonic music. While marketization has done away with previously guaranteed state subsidies for cultural workers, it has also created increasingly segmented and specialized niches, which in turn provide a range of surprising opportunities for more traditional forms of culture to re-establish themselves in positive ways.

A good example is the publishing and book-selling industry. After the close of many of the state-run Xinhua bookshops in the early 1990s, there was a period in the mid-1990s when there were hardly any bookshops in big cities such as Beijing. By the late 1990s, an impressive number of privately owned bookshops, selling books from a wide range of state-run and private publishing houses, had been established. Moreover, these bookshops, though obviously dependent on the profits from products of popular culture in aggregate, have been offering important niches for high culture activity, involving an increasingly large number of professional, non-state-employed cultural workers who are at times referred to (and have recently come under attack) as “independent intellectuals.”

It is undeniable that China’s increasingly varied and diverse sectors of cultural activity are increasingly affected (some would say overwhelmed) by a combination of market principles and internationalization. Many, particularly those who either enjoyed secure livelihoods and prestige under the state sponsored cultural bureaucracy and/or deplore the materialism and “dumbing down” of cultural products, are aghast at the ongoing and seemingly unstoppable forces of commodification and globalization. Yet all the articles in this collection see a much more nuanced reality. By any standard, marketization and globalization have brought about an enormous quantity and variety of cultural material that can be produced, consumed, enjoyed and studied. The Chinese market, as pointed out by Jing Wang in the opening article, is becoming increasingly segmented and advertising strategies aimed at reaching out to the various segments of the population provide a fascinating wealth of materials to study the emergence of cultural trends and the “tribes” and targeted groups (rather than “classes”) that consume them. Nor is it a zero-sum game, as lifestyle trends in first-tier cities provide models for second-tier cities to imitate, and from there to third-tier cities and county towns.

The closing article by Deborah Davis, dealing with consumer culture, holds an even more positive view towards the market reforms in China. Arguing against scholars who consider the consumer revolution in China to be on the whole disempowering, especially for those on the wrong end of the rich/poor divide, Davis uses interviews with Chinese informants to show the empowering effects of consumer culture in terms of choice and individual agency. By focusing on personal narratives *about* consumption, rather than on what is being consumed per se, Davis’s paper brings us closer to the culture of those who respond to the advertising strategies studied in the opening article. Consumer culture is far from egalitarian, and individual narratives of consumption to some extent reflect the frustration and bitterness inherent to unequal access and enjoyment. But Davis’s interviewees almost uniformly compare their current material

circumstances and prospects for further improvements favourably with the past. The advertising and marketing schemes elaborated in the opening article may well be ploys, but the desire to create a comfortable living space is real, and marketization has created a realm of consumer choice that individuals experience as expanded autonomy, pride and empowerment.

The market also offers new opportunities to those wishing to cross over between different genres of cultural production. The article by Yomi Braester, though mainly dealing with film, employs the concept of the “cultural broker,” individuals employing a variety of market strategies to increase the impact (and profits, of course) of cultural products by selling them to other segments of the market. So filmmakers increasingly make, and star in, television commercials; “realistic” and critically acclaimed filmmakers shoot promotional videos for slick real estate developments, whose owners themselves often fund new film projects. And commodification (major brand names that cannot be explicitly labelled as such) and the globalization of the film industry itself (the “Big Shot” of *Big Shot’s Funeral* is, tellingly, the Western movie star Donald Sutherland) are parodied in feature commercial films for an audience whose taste is sophisticated enough to understand the parody of the cult of brand names.

A clear market principle is also at work, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, in the socially marginalized but decidedly avant-garde world of rock music, discussed by Jeroen de Kloet. De Kloet focuses on the huge popularity of so-called *dakou* CDs, excess or “substandard” Western CDs with a hole punched in them (*da kou*) to indicate that they should be destroyed, after which they illegally end up on the Chinese market, where they are sold for (equally illegal) profit. Access to *dakou* versions of Western rock music has, as De Kloet shows, provided a group identity for an entire generation of Chinese rock musicians. This leads to significant cultural cross-fertilization, as different sub-genres of rock musicians draw on the influences circulating on the street from an assortment of *dakou* CDs “either censored from the market or deemed too marginal by China’s music distributors.” In contemporary rock culture we see at work the some of the trends suggested by De Kloet’s discussion of consumer culture: that through commodification, the *dakou* sub-culture ironically gains subversive power in contrast to dominant culture and state supported versions of marketization.

The increased variety in modes of expression, the residual presence of the state and the access to new media and new audiences are all discussed in Maghiel van Crevel’s paper on contemporary poetry, which starts out by contrasting an example of the still existing official (*guanfang*) version of poetry with a work from the PRC’s most outspoken poetic avant-garde, showcasing two extremes that encompass a huge spectrum of poetic activity. Despite its marginalized position, Van Crevel argues, poetry flourishes as never before in the PRC and is slowly coming to terms with, and starting to use to its own advantage, the challenge of the new (mass) media. Significantly, the avant-garde poem that opens Van Crevel’s

article was published, like many other works of the contemporary avant-garde, on the internet.

*Globalization: which market and whose culture?* The impact of global trends is present throughout Chinese society but perhaps nowhere as ardently debated, and directly used, as in cultural circles, and most of the articles reflect this. China's intellectual elite, like that of many other countries, appears to be increasingly anxious about the loss of national cultural identity that comes with globalization, understandably if not entirely accurately perceived most commonly as Westernization. Many of the culture debates in China are now raging on the internet, in chat rooms and on bulletin boards. The internet itself is of course the most pertinent symbol of globalization, as its technologies and protocols spread rapidly around the globe and especially rapidly around the PRC. But Michel Hockx's exploration of the recent popularity of "web literature" (*wangluo wenxue*) and online poetry communities in the PRC suggests that, despite the obvious globalization and standardization of hardware and software in running websites, the actual output of the Chinese community contains many elements that are culturally specific, indeed identifiably "Chinese," from the ways in which online poetry communities cross over into print media to the ways in which issues of censorship are not foregrounded, despite the continued tendency of Western scholarship to emphasize them.

Similar concerns are discussed in the article on fashion by Antonia Finnane, which neatly illustrates this collection's themes of marketization and globalization. The fashion industry is of course extremely close to the clothing manufacturing industry: one historically builds on the other, and both are very close to what their respective market segments "demand." Yet the Chinese fashion industry is plagued with twin anxieties: producing fashion that is both "authentically cultural" and critically well received and respected in the big Western fashion houses. Providing a very informative comparison between the current Chinese fashion industry and that of the Republican period, Finnane demonstrates how Chinese fashion designers have long struggled to find ways to express "Chineseness" – typically through the "tyranny of the *qipao*" – within a highly globalized but also highly segmented industry well policed by a small cohort of gatekeeping tastemakers outside China who on the whole have been much more responsive to Japanese than Chinese designers. While Chinese producers of ready-to-wear apparel have in aggregate "taken over the world" and done very well, the rarefied high end of design and fashion have struggled to incorporate authenticity with the international fashionista's constant demand for novelty with each year's collection.

The papers by Rachel Harris and Kirk Denton, on the Uyghur music scene in Xinjiang and on museum culture, most clearly address all three of these main themes. The practices of Uyghur musicians in Xinjiang are shown to be changing under the influence of the local music industry, the import of foreign CDs and a continued state presence. Then again, what is shown perhaps most clearly by all these papers is that

there no longer are ways to speak of “Chinese culture” as confidently as was possible during periods of excessive state control and cultural as well as economic autarky. The legacy of that period, the way it is represented and how such representations change as Chinese society changes, is the topic of Denton’s paper on museum culture. Focusing on museums and memorial sites dealing with modern history and the history of the communist revolution, Denton traces the recent boom in museum culture and discusses in detail the novel ways in which these often still state-run institutions continue to tell the Party’s historical narrative. The state is still very much present in contemporary museum culture, but its presence is less stark and obvious. Museums and memorials are now housed in expensive new buildings, overlaid with glitzy multimedia presentations, and look increasingly like contemporary museums more or less anywhere; but their content remains the product of negotiation between curators and Party officials. In this field, too, however, Denton identifies increasing segmentation and the existence of niches that allow for alternative stories to be told.

In all these articles, globalization and the way it creates new market niches and opportunities is a force to be reckoned with for cultural production (and subsequent marketing). Globalization interacts with particular cultural sectors in unanticipated ways: from the *dakou* CDs dumped on the streets of Beijing to the worries expressed by wannabe high fashion designers, to the adoption of chord progressions in flamenco music among Uyghur musicians, to avant-garde rockers keen to develop rock with Chinese characteristics. This undeniably gives rise to understandable anxieties about cultural authenticity. But the cultural products resulting from the opportunities made available by this kind of cross-fertilization are often interesting and even popular: the source of one individual’s set of cultural anxieties is often that of another’s enjoyment (whether through boho minimalist chic, new and vibrant forms of musical expression, or museums that are actually fun to go to).

Culture in contemporary China also shows evidence of “glocalization”; the combination of global trends with resolutely local contexts and meanings. So the new museum of Shanghai history participates in global trends of museum design and management while reifying Shanghai’s particular local history, and Uyghur popular music incorporates the Gipsy Kings while preserving motifs of Uyghur nostalgia for homeland and a receding way of rural life. And the “big three” centres of fashion and design (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) all retain undeniably local flavours, even as they all aspire to global recognition and respect. Some cultural products (music, film and clothing) travel across borders much more easily than others (poetry), and this in turn has the potential to shape both markets and the rise of new gatekeeping tastemakers and cultural brokers. The internet itself can be understood as reflection of, metaphor for, and disseminator of globalization. These articles confirm quite conclusively, though, that globalization cannot be understood as a form of either cultural or market neo-imperialism that is resulting in blandness and homogenization. Cultural producers and consumers in contemporary



China are a vibrant and innovative lot, who work creatively with new materials, seize market and cultural opportunities, and blend the traditional and the cutting edge, often in unusual and innovative ways.

In addition to our original three commissioned themes, most of the articles collected here touch upon the emergence of a new generation of Chinese cultural producers, consumers and gatekeepers, sometimes referred to as *xinxin renlei* (“Generation X”), who feel very much at home in the complicated and segmented world of culture that has emerged in the PRC. Displaying little interest in politics, little respect for high culture and sensing little distinction between what is actual and what is virtual, this generation increasingly determines what is “happening” in PRC culture. Arguably more post-socialist than post-modern, they also pose new challenges to researchers based in the West, who not only need to come to terms with the practices of new media and new genres but also have to suppress their instinctive tendency to discuss PRC culture within a framework of (resistance to) state control. For example, the capital and investment requirements for film production are enormous, so it should come as no great surprise that the networks of film producers are now increasingly intertwined with those of big real estate developers – that is where the money is. The stakes in film development are high, but so are the rewards if a popular hit is produced, particularly so if it is distributed internationally. At the other end of the spectrum, the consumers and producers of contemporary Chinese poetry are a fairly small group, and in at least some networks, producers, consumers and gatekeepers are likely to know each other personally. Yet despite the lack of a mass audience, the avant-garde poetry scene is an incredibly vibrant one, with a small but committed group of producers, a somewhat larger but still small group of consumers, and a variety of material products ranging from the glossily luxurious for beautifully bound volumes to production costs down to nearly zero for web-based poetry.

This collection provides an initial attempt to introduce new themes, new materials and new perspectives into research on Chinese culture. While we cover a great deal of territory, we are well aware that there are many more topics in contemporary culture of equal interest that merit consideration: fine art and painting, classical music and opera (both Western and traditional), dance, forms of literature other than poetry, and dramatic performance, to name just a few. We hope that other scholars will follow where we leave off.