

## The state question in Chinese popular cultural studies

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### Introduction

The metonymical association between 'China' and 'revolution' is a rhetorical game savoured by contemporary China observers. Ironic references in Western press to Chinese 'consumer revolution' and 'pop cultural revolution', made a parade of global capitalism's victory. Indisputably, vast social, cultural, and economic transformations have swept over China since 1992 when Deng Xiaoping gave his strategic Southern Excursion Talks to salvage a market reform mired in a bottleneck phase. Post-1992 China witnessed a dramatic release of forces of production and a steady annual GDP growth. Accompanying this economic takeoff is the public's growing craze for consumption. A fully fledged buyers' market has come into being. Chinese consumers, budding desires for music CDs, fast and frozen food, and convertibles may indeed serve to validate the ascendance of a 'counter-revolution' to socialist ideology. Tugging economic and cultural indexes in tandem, Western journalists and pundits have shown us time and again: China illustrates a paramount example of crony capitalism's new conquest.

'A fast drive to riches' (Powell 1997: 32);

'The last days of a dynasty: economic reform has crumbled Deng's "Authority of the Center"' (Watson et al 1995: 39);

'Kentucky Fried Chickens hatched in Beijing' (Cotter 1998: 1)

There is no want of sensational headlines dramatizing the duel of two competing 'regimes'. Is China the last battlefield of capitalism? Is what is being brought to its knees in the American fantasy nothing other than its old ideological foe: communism? Capital's virtual opponent, I argue, is neither a single country (a rival superpower or not) nor an alternative ideology, but a far more abstract, omnipresent and intractable one: the state. The conceptual turn - from internationalism to transnationalism and globalism - is well attested by our oversubscription to the terms of 'transnational culture' and 'global economy' - at the expense of 'nation' and 'state' - in re-mapping the New World Order.

The erosion of the state question in scholarship on contemporary Western culture reached an acme in the mid-1990s. (Often times, the advocates of the thesis of the powerless state include immigrant third-world scholars trained in the West.<sup>1</sup>) Few swam against the ruling paradigm of transnationalism and globalization. Those who did, Michael Mann and Linda Weiss (1997) come to mind, argued for the continuing relevance of territorially constituted forms of governance. Of critical importance is those critics' questioning of the vision of a single global society and, in particular, of

the claim to universalism inherent in those essentially Euro-American paradigms. Both Mann and Weiss contend that while transnational-global capitalism may have weakened the 'northern', nation-states (nations closely aligned with the European Union, EU), the thesis of the powerless state hardly applies to the 'southern' states (Mann 1997). I may push their argument further by suggesting that even in the case of the EU, the blueprint for a federalist model has already generated an opposite vision. We should hardly be surprised at French President Jacques Chirac's latest response to the call of German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer for a pan-European government: 'neither [France nor Germany] wanted a European superstate that would substitute for nation states'<sup>7</sup> (Vinocur 2000: 1).

Add China to the configuration and the issue at stake is more than the classical dilemma of (federalist) structure versus (nationalist) agency. A specific ideological agenda emerges to lend urgency to the Western thesis of the powerless state: the 'contestation' between capitalism and socialism. A typical exercise in the US often renders a showcase of a changing China totally absorbed in those transnational and postmodern socio-cultural practices that are said to plunge the post-socialist country into an inexorable movement toward the borderless human condition of post-modernity. At the core of such discourses is the base-superstructural thinking that writes off the state as an instance of determination in social transformations. The locus of change is inscribed in an autonomous chain reaction triggered by capital - an 'economic' revolution (changes in base structure) determined a popular 'cultural' revolution on one hand, and necessitated the hollowing out of the post-socialist state, on the other.

At issue is not only the base-superstructural thinking but also the paradigm of globalization, both of which posit the state as determined rather than determining. By privileging the state question, however, I am not suggesting that the Chinese post-socialist state operates outside the circuit of transnational capital. Today, it seems superfluous to reiterate the mutually constitutive relationship between the global and the local, and between the transnational and the national. I am not taking issue with theorists like Bob Jessop who perceives the 'relativisation of scale' as the only valid conceptual model that captures the intricate processes of globalization (Jessop 1999). In his framework, no given scale of analysis, whether it is the local, the national, the regional, or the transnational, is foregrounded. My purpose here is to re-articulate the analytical scale of the state without ascribing the absolute value of agency either to transnational capital (as is usually the case) or to the post-socialist state. Western observers'<sup>7</sup> anxieties about vindicating capital as the sole agent of change in the case of China are too often symptomatic of the cold-war ideology. Perhaps more revelatory about such anxieties are the enunciatory position and the geographical location of those observers: positioned at the centre and located in Euro-America.

Coming back to the specific context of post-1992 China, I ask: can the paradigm of transnational capital, important as it is, make a claim for its totalizing explanatory power for a case as unevenly and contradictorily configured as that of China?

We have noted the dramatic repercussions of Deng Xiaoping's 1992 southern excursions, which steered a post-traumatic China into a U-turn toward liberal market economy. But 1989 usurped 1992 in the Western mental calendar. The story about the 'rehabilitation' of an autocratic regime is hardly newsworthy unless it fits into the grand narrative of transnationalism. We are thus continually fed the paradox of an enterprising China today: its very success is built upon the bankruptcy of its ideology. In short, the Chinese state has sold its agenda to foreign investors.

The theoretical implications of such a metanarrative are many: we are coached to assume that only the market has a logic, that the state entertains no 'idea' of its own but merely a set of contingent operations performing a functional reasoning, serving the needs of capital. At stake is more than the issue of how we can bring the trope of the state to a fuller theoretical account. What also matters is a nuanced understanding of the mutually constitutive relationship between transnationalism and nation-statism. The former often reinforces and naturalizes the latter, while the latter (even an ultra-statist regime like Malaysia)<sup>2</sup> is committed to courting multinational capital and playing a complicit role in furthering the process of globalization. But our emphasis on the collusion between those two strange bedfellows often blinded us to the equally strong commitment made by the states - especially those situated in the third world - to position itself antagonistically vis-a-vis capital, thus saving rampant (transnational) capitalism from itself.

This suggests that we view with caution all the first world hypes about the twin 'culture-economy' interpretative lenses through which a developing country like China is being viewed systematically. The state question is always missing whenever we address China's epochal transition. We tend to talk about such a transition in terms of economy (movement from state to market economy) and culture (from high to pop, from national to transnational), but rarely in terms of the restructuring of the state ruling technology and the changing stock of its ideological practices. A systematic study of the structural transformation of Chinese post-socialist state and the mutually constitutive relationship between state policies and popular social discourses is long overdue. I propose to put the analytical categories of 'state' and 'policy' back into our study of Chinese popular culture, which has been increasingly dominated by the trope of the market and transnationalism.

I divide this paper into three parts. Part I introduces the notion of 'access' as a new command metaphor of the Chinese post-socialist state. Of particular interest is the state's invention of a series of discursive constructs that were assimilated into the daily lingo and social practices, serving to rationalize a different ruling technology. Part II examines the relationship between normalizing discourses, policies, and the entitlement of 'urban citizenship'. Part III returns to the theoretical question of the state and suggests future directions for policy-oriented Chinese popular cultural studies. This inquiry into the state problem will lead us to the less frequented domain of scholarship; namely, relations of policies and culture, which ultimately invites us to explore the interface between policy studies and cultural studies.

## Part I: popular discourse and state policy

'Economic globalization is not a blessing but a danger/ In the wake of the Asian economic crisis in summer 1997, Chinese readers greeted such headlines at ever shorter intervals in their daily papers. One editorial after another urged the state to regulate finance markets and make pre-emptive strikes against global currency speculators. News like this raised alarm in all quarters. Will China move forward or back-pedal? This is a burning question that plagues those China watchers deeply entrenched in bipolar thinking - the centre is all or nothing.<sup>3</sup> Few recognize that statist discourses in post-1992 China are both reality checkers and symbolic biddings.

To illustrate the symbolic and real efficacy of state interventions - neither precluding the other - I would like to cite two specific examples of post-1992 statutes, one with emblematic value only, and another, illustrative of a communist state in disciplinary action.

To set a nutrition directive - 'A Planned Action for the Improvement of Nutrition in Chinese Diet' (1998) - against a penal law banning 'multi-level marketing' (1998) is to drive home my point: that Chinese statist regulation is sometimes merely rhetorical, and at other times, consequential. It is as absurd to argue that the state's presence is felt at the dinner table as it is to assume that China's socialist state apparatus is disarmed and therefore unable to clamp down upon what it deems 'harmful' to socialist spiritual civilization. When it comes to the stipulation of a standard daily intake of calories (2600 g), protein (72 g), and fat (72 g) for every citizen, the government may indeed be powerless, and the Nutrition directive a paper tiger. But governmental action against the once-booming marketing industry of 'multi-level marketing' affected the lives of tens of millions. 'Multi-level marketeers' (or Mice Club members in the Chinese idiom) cut across gender, age, social groups, rural and urban boundaries, and established extensive and multiplying direct-selling networks all over China. The state's efforts to regulate this nascent industry, a seedbed for mountebanks and con men, dated back to 1995 with half a dozen half-hearted directives. When it became clear that 'the Law of Regulating Multi-Level Marketing' (1997) did not do much to curb the organized swindling activities of the bad 'multi-level marketing' elements, the State Department and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce intervened in early 1998 to practise what a communist regime knows best: outlawing the industry categorically. (*Renmin ribao* 5 February 1998; Li, Bida 1998).

These two cases illustrate that state intervention in post-socialist China may amount to nothing more than a symbolic bidding, or conversely, it may bear witness to a potent ruling apparatus already in place. An interventionist state, in other words, has real claws on one hand, and sham ones on the other. This question - whether the Chinese state is powerful - is thus a red herring and a question whose answer can only be provided by multi-year empirical teamwork undertaken by social scientists and cultural theorists together. This is a point to which I will return when I address

the larger question of theorizing the Chinese state in the last section. For now, the issue that the theorists of the post-socialist state must confront is the agenda and rationality (rather than the ruling capacity) of the state. Predictably, this is not a proposition that China analysts are eager to defend: powerful or not, the Chinese state is not purposeless.

What then is its governing vision? There are different approaches to an analysis of such a vision. Political economists debated over the issue of 'state capacity'<sup>4</sup> by examining Beijing's fiscal policies and the changing central-provincial fiscal relations in the wake of the 1994 tax-sharing reform (Li, Linda Chelan 1999). I contribute to the discussion of the growing or waning presence of the state by exploring the pedagogical practices of the post-socialist state that came to be inscribed in popular discourses.

First of all, the ideal citizen, which the Chinese state has taken pains to enculturate since 1992, is no longer the class or national subject, but a civilized subject. Through what means does the state target its modern population for thought and conduct transformation? The answer to this question can hardly rest on 'policing' alone. In post-1992 China, social regulation took subtler pedagogical forms, but its effect is at once immediate and pervasive. The reinvention of a social imaginary, and with it, a new subject, depends heavily upon the making of a new common sense.

Mass media is the most effective channel through which new social discourses engineered by the state can be propagated and circulated. The sheer extent of the discursive shift of post-1992 China is unprecedented. Gone are the decades-old discourses such as 'modern consciousness', 'reform and opening [to the outside world]', and 'culture fever'. What greets the Chinese public daily (in newspapers and on television) is a new inventory of officially enfranchised discourses such as 'leisure culture', 'legalizing economy', 'knowledge economy',<sup>5</sup> 'commercial ethics', 'changing tracks', 'the unemployment of state workers' and, of course, 'corporatization'.

Other society slang terms (e.g. 'men with deep pockets' and 'secretary-mistresses') undoubtedly captured popular imagination as tenaciously as the official idiom listed above. There is no single discursive regime that can now claim its monopoly over an increasingly stratified and contradictory social reality of 1990s China. But we can proclaim with certainty that both pop and the official lingo tapped to the same rhythm of a post-enlightenment era. All those catch phrases point to the emergence of a new common-sense drifting toward a post-ideological perception of *homo economicus*. How to redefine the meaning of entitlement is the central issue. A double discursive shift has noticeably taken place since the mid-1990s: the expropriation of the intellectuals' discourse of enlightenment by the state's discourse of access and, more importantly, the turn of the state command metaphor from control to access.

### *'Leisure culture'*

Just how effectively could the state mobilize its re-established discursive hegemony to propagate a politics of access? And what does the 'access' refer to? What is the new

entitlement programme like? My previous work on 'leisure culture' as a popular discourse in metropolitan China suggests some answers to those questions (Wang 2001). The significance of leisure culture campaigns in Beijing cannot be overstated. So symbolic was the capital's Double Leisure Day Campaign (1996) that leisure culture fevers soon blasted other townships and metropolises.

In February 1996, the Propaganda Bureau of the Municipal Commission in Beijing published its latest version of 'A Civilizational Contract with Residents'. To implement this contract, the Bureau, together with 12 sub-committees, launched a nine-month long campaign of the 'Double Leisure Day Action Package'. Several major leisure activities were promoted: visiting museums, going to the movies and theatres, doing sports, sightseeing, learning English, and learning how to use computers. This was the first time that the municipal state appropriated the category of 'leisure culture' into its pedagogical agenda and, in so doing, gave a face-lift to the Party's age-old discourse of socialist spiritual civilization. The theme underlying this operation was unambiguously put as 'learning how to become a modern and civilized Beijingers'. The resident's capacity for being a modern, cultured urban citizen is now being measured by his or her recognition of the changing concept of time into pastime. Furthermore, not only is the concept of 'time' disciplined into that of 'pastime', but the concept of 'civil resident' - and by extension, 'civil citizen' - itself incorporates the new meaning of 'civil consumer'. You may ask: what is at stake for the state?

As an unabashed summons to the public to consume 'free time', Leisure Culture campaigns had several understated agendas: it officially introduces the concept of 'pastime' as a new yardstick by which the civil qualities of Beijingers can be measured; it links 'leisure' with outdoor activities; and, by implication, it stimulates consumer demand that would soak up inventory and accelerate mass production in turn. In other words, by naming leisure-as-consumption, the state disciplines production simultaneously. Furthermore, in advocating rational recreations, all of which emphasize the public character of entertainment, Beijing's municipal government came up with its own powerful antidotes against the triple evils of capitalism: conspicuous consumption, a rampant privacy-driven pleasure industry that corrupts public morality, and, most important, the rising social discontent resulting from the quickly expanding hierarchies between the haves and have-nots. Ideological stakes aside, there was an economic *raison d'être* for the policy of the double leisure day: the boom of the tertiary sector. Since 1995, fast growing traditional service industries (e.g. retailing, distribution, tourism, food, commerce, public transportation and public service) and the new tertiary sector (e.g. information, consulting services, science/technology, finance and real estate) have created new opportunities of employment, absorbed surplus labour from state-owned enterprises, and fuelled up the GDP growth. The local economy, in particular, relies on the quick expansion of the tertiary sector. The state's enculturation of the consciousness of 'leisure' in the mind of urban citizens has thus gone a long way, both in terms of ideological and economic gains.

What gets easily shuffled out of view, however, are neither the ideological stakes

nor the economic epiphenomenon but the policy origins of leisure culture fever. 'Double leisure day', or its alternate term 'the big weekend', is a discursive construct whose birthday can be dated precisely because it was a state policy decreed, significantly, on Labor Day. Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, until 1994, a Chinese working week was 48 hours. And the 'leisure' activities of urbanites, constricted by the deficient service of public transportation on the one hand and the lack of public entertainment venues on the other, were largely confined within home. It should now be clear that the arrival of a consumption-oriented leisure fever in China presupposes the institutionalization of double leisure day - a 40 hour work week put into effect nationwide on 1 May 1995. The mutually constitutive relationship between policy and culture is apparent. Before we hasten to celebrate Chinese 'leisure culture' fever as another example of the triumph of transnationalism, we have to reckon with the fact that 'weekend culture' in China is an official discourse born from a state policy. We should ask instead (as I did in the above, with answers provided): what were the ideological and economic agendas of the state in announcing the arrival of the 'double leisure day', and no less significantly, designating its birthday to Labor Day?

The discourse of CULTURE AS LEISURE foregrounds the policy issue because it refocuses our attention on the meaning of culture as a state instrument for subject formation. More specifically, discourses about the 'double leisure day' reveal to us the changing political technologies of a modernizing state polity: it reorganizes recreational spaces, constructs the meaning of the new citizen-consumer, disciplines production and consumption simultaneously, and reinvents the notion of 'the public (sphere)' by defining it in terms of the people's entitlement to leisure cultural goods and services. The emphasis on the centrality of leisure culture as an egalitarian discourse is strategically vital to a regime caught in the dilemma of having to carry out its agenda of globalization while finding the means to mediate the contradictions resulting from uneven capital accumulation. The public, however, hardly recognized leisure discourse as governmental propaganda. On the contrary, 'leisure culture' was seen as a social discourse smuggled into China from abroad and camouflaged as a cultural symptom of China coming west - a giant leap towards a faceless global village.

All this may be true. And I have no intention of downgrading transnationalism as an analytical grid for studies of contemporary Chinese culture. But 'double leisure day' discourses are as much about control and statist logic as they are about pleasure and transnationalism. Those discourses unfold the happy vista of an egalitarian consumer public theoretically unmarred by vertical hierarchies; in short, participation in the democratic consumption of leisure culture. There is a certain compensatory logic at work here: if post-socialist China is increasingly divided by re-emerging social inequality, officially sponsored leisure culture and symbolic consumption are at least affordable, and available to all.

## **Part II: a new common sense**

The call for rational recreation serves as one of the many instances that demonstrate the heavy investment of the Chinese state in the ongoing process of (social) knowledge production, known as common sense in lay language. Laying bare the complicit relationship between popular social discourses and state agenda may constitute a critical exercise in its own right. However, my purpose of undertaking such an exercise is to go beyond this familiar territory by foregrounding the significance of the field of culture understood as 'constitutively governmental' (Bennett 1992: 32).

The downgrading of the culture/government couplet in Chinese studies today can indeed be better understood if we remember the oversaturation of modern Chinese history with 'culture as propaganda'. Reinventing this problem at this moment, however, is urgent on many grounds. It addresses the methodological imbalance arisen from the dominant 'culture/market' dyad. Even more significantly, it complicates the question of historical discontinuity. I have shown how the post-socialist state has undergone a transformation from autocratic to regulatory polity. So is post-1992 Chinese state qualitatively different from Mao's reign? This kind of binary thinking - asserting the total disjunction of one era from the other or insisting upon its continuity in crude terms - defeats our purpose of understanding the many faces of the post-socialist regime. That the state has become more entrepreneurial and image-conscious now does not imply that it has given up its means and end of setting the agenda for popular culture. The intent to exercise control over culture, the mainstay of the socialist platform, persists in the post-socialist tenure. Contrary to all the hypes about the market determination of culture, not only is contemporary Chinese popular culture not cut loose from state practices, but it oftentimes maintains a parasitic relationship with policy proclamations and political slogans.

The crux of the matter then is not the weakening of the purpose, but the technological refinement - or, shall we say, modernization - of the state ruling apparatus - a modern vision of governance materialized neither in force nor in crude ideological campaigns but in a newly made COMMON SENSE. So skilfully is the post-socialist state weaving its agenda into a new common sense that ideology is blurring into (commercial) culture, and the haunting presence of the state is disguised in the new apparel of the market. Today, on the mere surface, 'leisure culture' represents market reasoning rather than a statist logic. This is, after all, what hegemony is all about: naturalization of ruling technologies.

The discourse of 'leisure as culture' illustrates how cultural policies serve as powerful tools for the making of a new common sense made up of two basic understandings: (1) common enjoyment is a right for all; (2) the necessity of modern citizens to consume leisure. At least two issues were immediately shoved underneath the carpet: the citizen's civil and political rights; and the third issue, of citizenship and social rights, superseded.

In the meantime, other supporting discourses for this new common sense have entered into quick circulation and become part of the reconstructed social knowledge. Among them are discourses on 'consumption', 'consumer', and 'legalizing economy'



and 'commercial ethics' (Li, Tuo 1998). Critical of both agrarian and communist values while affirmative about the concept of credit and contractual spirit, the discourse of 'commercial ethics' drives home the paradox of post-socialist China: the blurring of state logic into market reasoning. In fact, sometimes, it is hard to tell which is being co-opted by the other. In a complementary movement, discourses about consumption and 'legalizing economy' highlight the key moment in social engineering of the post-socialist state: how to link common sense with a view of citizenship that is developed in the definition of neither civil nor political rights, but in terms of a vaguely conceived notion of social rights defined not as redistributive justice, but as a matter of consumers' entitlement to authentic brand names.<sup>6</sup> Should it surprise any one that accompanying the mushrooming of legal discourses since the mid-1990s are editorial headlines such as 'protecting consumer rights is the self and same as protecting human rights?' (Yang and Pan 1998: 16).

Once again, indubitably, we are witnessing a changing political rationality at work. This brings us back full circle to my argument about the interconnection between state policies, enculturation, ideal residentship/citizenship, and the construction of common sense. My discussion of Beijing's leisure culture campaigns serves as one example of enculturation - the state's emphasis on a modern Chinese citizen's entitlement to 'leisure' and a 'cultured' way of life. 'Mass recreation' as propagated in those leisure campaigns forms an integral part of the arduous process of citizen formation. To consume leisure and to strike against fake brand names has become common sense for cultured, law-abiding citizens. Culture, seen in this light, can be best defined, quoting Tony Bennett, as a set of 'institutionally embedded relations of government in which forms of thought and conduct of extended populations are targeted for transformation, (Bennett 1992: 26). At stake is the legitimation of the state. At its disposal are the mass media that shape popular disposition toward a new economic subjectivity in the ideal citizen. There is a certain consistency of this subject imagined by the Chinese state: this is a subject that works harder and moonlights more in order to spend more for leisure, a subject that partakes in rational recreation to maximize his (renewed) capacity for labour, a subject committed to bailing herself out of the 'unemployment' rut through the cultivation of the enterprising self, a subject learning to become a law abiding consumer with a burgeoning 'finance consciousness' and a will to save less and invest more (hopefully on real estate and stock), and ultimately a subject that is subjugated to market reasoning at the state's command.

An interventionist state highly conscious of what its own regulatory logic has achieved cannot be dismissed as an ensemble of contingent managerial mechanisms reacting to crises. Common sense as a new means of enculturation - and the key to hegemony - has proven that state policies can claim the status of, and blur into, normalizing discourses. The presence of the state, if felt at all, is accepted as a benevolent one that serves the best interest of a Chinese public who now take the post-ideological form of rule for granted. The story of hegemony as the process of naturalization of power is now complete.

### **Part III: the state question and policy studies**

The previous section demonstrates the complexity of the problematic of state versus market provision. Capital and the state are not external to each other. The legitimation of the post-socialist regime depends upon how well the ruling elite navigates between laissez-faire capitalism and state socialism. 'Leisure culture' provides one of the many examples where marketization is seen not as incompatible with the Party State's propaganda objectives and ideological control.

Nor should national provisions and state policies be seen as questions relevant only to Chinese studies. Revamping the state problem carries methodological ramifications for a jaded US cultural studies establishment that remains disconnected to the public to whom a rhetorical oppositionalism matters little. How do we reorient a meta-critical cultural studies that often theorizes from the vacuum toward grounded critical cultural policy studies? This entails a shift of critical agenda from the studies of the politics of representation to a critical engagement with policy. First, however, any responsible critic suspicious of foundational thinking should acknowledge the convoluted route between policy and politics so as not to mistake modern-day policy makers as a homogenous body serving a singular agenda only. In the case of China, the identification between policy and a single source of power (emanating from the centre) is even less sustainable because the political field of post-socialist China is traversed by multiple players (at the central, provincial, and other subgoverning levels) with competing, conflicting interests.

This said, let me turn to the question of theorizing the post-socialist Chinese state. First of all, my exercise so far attempts to locate an interface between those political theorists whose interest is placed on state institutions and cultural theorists, such as Gramsci and Althusser, who focus on the ideological practices and discourses of the state. The 'state' understood in the latter sense has no demarcated peripheries, a conceptual ambivalence characteristic of all cultural theorists' approach to the state question. Such an absence of conceptual clarity can be remedied if we reinsert our examination of state discourses into an institutional frame of analysis. State ideologies, no matter how amorphous they may appear, can only be articulated (in the form of a continually reinvented 'common sense') and reproduced through specific projects that are orchestrated by state organs. Thus, the study of the ideological practices of the state presupposes the investigation of the institutional means of intervention

available at the state's disposal. My discussion of 'leisure culture', for instance, demonstrates how the ideology of consuming leisure was dependent upon the institutionalization of the 8 hour/5 day working week in 1995. Yet supplementing the ideological study of the state's intent by foregrounding the institutional analysis of its practices has its own pitfalls.

The Foucauldian notion that the state has no essence but an ensemble of changing institutional practices risks overstating the case of the primacy of practices over intent

(Foucault 1991; Gordon 1991: 4). As contemporary supplements to Foucault's emphasis on micro-powers, theories about the fluidity of the state, or a withering state - cast after Adam Smith's thesis on the invisible hand - may carry a certain truth in characterizing the modern liberal state and neo-liberal state in Europe and America. The Chinese state, however, with its 50 year old tradition of state monopoly socialism on one hand and its deeply ingrained Confucian prototype of 'state-family, (what the Chinese term 'state' literally means) on the other, unfolds a picture of political reasoning that is not only not invisible but which certainly cannot be derived from a Western paradigm that emphasizes the 'elimination of the family as a model' for the development of the art of government from the eighteenth century onward (Foucault 1991: 98). In the general scheme of things, the Chinese (central and local) state apparatus remains the primary vector of power, and its rationality, intrinsic to the art of government.

### *Programming the theoretical project*

What resources are available for theorizing the Chinese post-socialist state, if we cannot borrow Western paradigms verbatim? Or, rather, what conceptual steps need to be taken to circumvent China cultural theorists' default practice of subjecting Chinese data to Western theoretical metanarratives? To turn this analytical habit on its head, we need to study the Chinese political theories of governance as practised by both the imperial state and the modern nation-state founded after 1911. Next, the plurality of Chinese locales has to be brought into the theoretical discourse to complicate the notion of 'governing' and the 'governed'. Macro-geographically, China's vast inland makes 'multiple localities' a far more daunting question for state theorists who study China than for those who study North America or southern Europe. The Guangdong model, for instance, is as markedly different from the Xinjiang or Tibet model, as it is from the Shanxi or Yunnan models. To complicate the picture further, even within a single province, the multi-layered sub-governing structure (e.g. metropolis, county, township) makes generalizations about administrative infrastructure difficult to draw.

Those conceptual parameters aside, methodologically, a theoretical project about the Chinese state has to begin with the study of state policies. To wit, a grounded, judicious mapping and critique of the 'overarching' system of state power (whether we are speaking of institutions or ideologies) are predicated on the examination of the concrete instrument of statist domination and control, i.e. public policy, seen in its pluralistic manifestations as it traffics through various local states, their agencies, and various other embodiments. This methodological point of entry, inasmuch as the concept of 'policy' provides the meeting ground between the study of state discourses and that of state institutions, has the advantage of drawing together the analytical resources of both cultural studies and institutional studies. Just to name a few policy areas that may help us draw a composite profile of the Chinese state in action: poverty-alleviation programmes, social welfare, housing reform, migrant labour, environmental protection, marriage law, advertising, fiscal policies, national minorities policies, electronic communication and intellectual property laws and higher

education. The abstract theoretical question of state discourses, state capacities, and state institutions can only be addressed from critical perspectives developed from collaborative researches on the material processes of the making and implementation of specific social, economic, and cultural policies, processes that unfolded at provincial and subprovincial governing sites as well as in Beijing.

Such a study, exhaustive as it may sound, does not risk self-fragmentation because it evolves from a central theoretical question that coheres diverse examinations of different policy initiatives and policy environments. Namely, how does the Chinese theoretical framework 'there are policies above, but counter-measures from below' complicate the question of structure versus agency? This framework stresses the plurality of government-based policy locations by assigning cardinal value to the issue of policy implementation taking place at subgoverning sites below (rather than focusing on policy making at the centre, from above). It is when a given policy is passed down to the next level of government for implementation that local stakes emerge to give life to the concept of agency. The agency question thus foregrounded is especially intriguing in the Chinese context because the symbolic locale of the 'above' and the 'below' shifts simultaneously within each of the five levels of the hierarchical structure of governance. Province, metropolis, county township, and village - each is positioned above and below the other at the same time. With the exception of village, the smallest unit, which is more or less self-governed, each level of government serves as a double-player - handing down policies to the next lower level while inventing counter-measures to deal with the government at one level above so that local interests can be fully articulated and safeguarded.

The increasingly important problem of local interests and local states has indeed demonstrated the larger trend of the political rationality of the post-socialist state. While the state remains efficacious, its power is purposefully diffused to different segments of the social body as part of the larger programme of the modernization of its ruling apparatus. This implies that the dissemination of power is a state policy. For the first time in Chinese history, we can speak of a growing nexus of power relations that is not exactly vertical - social control from above - but horizontal and increasingly multilateral. The reconfiguration of the centre vis-a-vis the local - both now unstable entities that exist in and through relation to each other - can only be brought into relief if we follow an empirically based, theoretically motivated programme as I laid out above. It is only through our reckoning with the multiple localities of China that the concealed question of agency in post-socialist polity can reveal itself in its full complexity. That is, a critical policy study of China anchors the project of theorizing the state in a double analytical frame of control and agency. How to discuss the 'agency' question from within, not outside, the dominant narrative of the state, is a theoretical lesson that the specific locale of post-socialist China provides for critics who, by too readily conflating 'agency' with the Western notion of (political) resistance and alternatives, pared it down to a term of simple 'oppositionalism'.

Such a grand scheme, of course, demands carefully planned teamwork, which remains a vision at this stage.<sup>7</sup>As a modest and preliminary attempt at anticipating

how the question of agency may play itself out in the process of the increasingly centrifugal flow of the social-local, I turn to the tiniest and the lowest governmental unit from 'below<sup>7</sup>' in the metropolis - the street - for observation.

### *The street*

The street as an organizational unit - a legacy of Maoism- is not only unlikely to vanish in corporatizing China, but in many instances, it has succeeded in capitalizing on the privatization initiative and resuscitating its administrative capacity. Given the unevenness of development and hence the impossibility of generalizing about 'China' from a single given locale, I shall avoid collapsing my examination of the street administration at particular districts in two metropolises into a grand theorization about the street organizational reform of /China,. Theorizing the local' is an oxymoron that I view with increasing suspicion. My immediate purpose is to challenge the conventional thinking about the categorical demise of street committees as an administrative unit in post-1992 China. This is not to suggest that the street committees' infamous power of prying into the neighbours' affairs remained intact, given the increasingly fragmentary structure of the urban landscape that would undergo even faster decentralization as the housing reform is in full swing. There are simply more profitable ends for the street committees to pursue. What caught my attention is the rehabilitation of the image of street committees in some metropolitan quarters in recent years, as it evolved from a moribund unit focused on the odds-and-ends of domesticity, to an enterprising module cohering the economic and social functions of the neighbourhood. I will summarize an important study written by a scholar at Fudan University on the structural reform of street committees in contemporary Shanghai and supplement those arguments with my own observations about the changing function of the street as a vibrant economico-administrative unit in Beijing. Both instances rewrite the binary grammar of control versus autonomy.

The subtitle of Zhu Jian'gang's essay - 'A Model of Strong State and Strong Society' - summarizes neatly his challenge to the binarism in which 'strong society' and 'strong state' preclude each other. He argues, instead, that within the dominion of the street, the Party state and the autonomous space of the social do not discriminate against each other. On the contrary, they are mutually constitutive. Thus, the growth of local autonomy does not presuppose and dictate the mitigation of state power. The coexistence of the powerful centre and a strong locale is not only not a theoretical contradiction but a reality attested by case studies.

Studying the change of administrative structure of a Shanghai street district, Five Miles Bridge, from 1949-1997, Zhu Jian'gang shows us how the power structure of this particular district evolved from a simple mechanism of Party monopolism to today's three-tier coordinating apparatus. The new system of street management is made up not only of pre-existing official establishments such as the Street Office and Residents' Committee, but also of half a dozen newly formed 'intermediary', or some may say, semi-autonomous, organizations. Between those official and semi-official

organizations, the state-appointed Street Committee of Party Work Force wove its way in and out via a delicate bureaucratic latticework of supervision. One may indeed argue that the authority of the state is strengthened in the wake of this organizational realignment. However, the relationship between the centre and local is never again the same as before. Decision making about street affairs is now mediated by a criss-crossing network of management, which acknowledges and invites the participation of unofficial channels. This is a small revolution that goes a long way. The local resources and power of the Wuliqiao Street District are now to be shared rather than dominated by the Party. The street-based administrative ensemble, a medley of central and local elements in the name of the 'Urban District Management Committee,' is dubbed as a Politburo in miniature (Zhu Jian'gang 1997). This signifies a systemic change, a track-shifting (*zhuangui*) from the top-down to a bottom-up order of governance.

All signs lead us to anticipate, as Zhu Jian'gang predicts, an intriguing metropolitan streetscape - a continual redistribution of the administrative power of street districts and an increasing vocalization of residents for participatory politics. Paradoxically, the deeper the penetration of the state into foundational social units, the faster it stimulates the growth of the self-governing capacity of the semi-autonomous space emerging from within. Political power has begun the long-awaited process of diffusion and decentralization in post-socialist China - a cliché delivered to us from analysts on macro-fiscal planning down to this specific case study of the management of the street as a microscopic social unit. The Foucauldian call for 'cutting off the King's head in analyses of power and sovereignty' (Jarvis and Paolini 1995: 9) is a far cry for post-1992 China. The blurred boundaries between state and society in post-1992 China took the edge off, instead of answering, the Foucauldian bidding. The centre is not a straw man, although it agrees to an arrangement that society's parasitic existence with the state is beneficial rather than inimical to itself - a clear landmark of Chinese post-socialism.

The street will no doubt continue to play an important role in this shifting landscape of governance, especially if we recognize its double function both as a management unit and as an economic module, cashing in on the privatization incentive. I may even suggest that the street cannot sustain its governing efficacy if it exists merely as an administrative superstructure without a material base. This is especially true when, in recent years, street councils were obliged to participate in more and more budget-taxing programmes such as cooperating with district police departments to fight against drug traffickers, keeping prostitution in check, and holding other bad elements in surveillance. Beijing's 'Hard Strike' Campaign (1996-1997) against street gangs and criminals would be inconceivable without its tapping into the street's policing resources. And in the wake of the state-sector reform, it became obvious that the street is also called upon to bear the burden of containing the socially displaced - those who no longer work for state-owned industries. As more and more social responsibilities were transferred from dissolving work units to street committees in urban China, the latter have replaced the former as the pivot of social organization and an occupational centre for surplus labour. It should not be surpris-

ing, then, that street based communal services are now considered as a vital gateway -next to the private sector - to opportunities of reemployment, especially for those labourers whose occupational skills are limited.<sup>8</sup>

This affirms that we cannot assign a mere symbolic value to the status inflation of the street in urban China. The street is an economic as well as a political unit. Take Beijing for example, a post-socialist 'street economy' conceptualized in the model of modern commercial streets constitutes the backbone of the capital city's bid for urban regeneration. When the five-year long reconstruction of Dongan Market was finally completed in January 1998, all the neighbouring retailers and department stores on Wangfujing Street anticipated a comeback that demanded a strategically formed united front rather than old-time cut-throat competition (Zhu Ying 1997: 1; Li, Fei 1998: 7). This entails that commercial contests are seen to take place increasingly between streets/districts rather than between individual stores that may or may not carry a vintage name as weighty as 'Dongan'.

Joining Wangfujing in similar face-lifting moves toward developing a street-based thicket of commercial best sellers are the Big Palisade (Da Zhalan) near the Forbidden City and Zhongguancun in the vicinity of Beida. As Old Peking's first and most active commercial street, Big Palisade is banking on the critical mass of age-old trademarks (lao zeihao) to lure back consumers who have been drawn to modern-day department stores. All publicity campaigns about Dazhalan zeroed in on its provision of a vibrant street culture that is at once culturally authentic and cost effective. This forms such a contrast to Zhongguancun in the Haidian District, best known for its appeal to customers who linger on its fabled streets of electronic goods with deeper pockets looking toward the postmodern West.

What fascinates me about the quick development of street economy in China's metropolitan centres is not merely some district head's fantasy about building ten contiguous commercial streets - each featuring its own staple - as a blueprint to measure up with Ginza in Tokyo (Pan Jie 1997: 1). All the strategic planning in various degrees stress the 'social efficacy' of street economy, reminding me that China is, after all, a regime recalcitrant about keeping its socialist legacies as best as it can.

In this light, the street as a throwback to revolutionary China beckons us to take note of its rich communist traditions. Street economy, in fact, is nothing less than a remnant of the Great Leap Forward, reminiscent of an economic collectivism. Perhaps it is those mnemonic associations with the socialist past that prompt me to look beyond the postmodern streetscape-to-be for a China to which the following questions are of critical importance: What are the fiscal implications of a booming street economy in metropolitan centres? What is the income tax policy for street retailers, department stores, and licensed street peddlers? How much of it flows into the budget of street committees that take charge of non-profit communal organizations? And in what way is the street-based taxation institutionalized? In other words, did the street as a political and social unit feed on the street as an economic unit?

Those are questions I am not prepared to answer, not only because they fall out of my area of speciality, but perhaps even more significantly, because of my lack of a working relationship that indigenous researchers of my intellectual profile may have forged, formally or informally, with politicians and policy makers who wrestle with questions of whether China goes. I raise those questions not in a problem-solving spirit, but for the purpose of recapitulating my observation about the symbiosis between research and policy, and to bring home a point that cultural studies scholars would gladly ignore: that is, researchers generate knowledge that may be useful to the public and to the powerful agencies they vow to critique but only pay a lip service to change. I am not naive about the power relations between researchers and policy makers under a regime known for its disciplinary rigor. But I want to emphasize: new conceptualizations of a social issue emerging from research 'does trickle and percolate through to both policy makers and the general public' (Bartley 1994: 205), registering concern in time, if not revising socio-economic agendas immediately.

We have now come full circle in my argument - the central place of state and policy in cultural studies. A few final words need to be said about the vulnerable spots of policy-oriented cultural studies to complete the picture. Given how much influence the state and global market exerted in tandem on Chinese consumer and popular culture, too often we dwell on the issue of power, drawing a premature equation between the 'people' - who are agents with multiple and conflicting subject positions - and the faceless 'masses' who are said to be doomed to subjugate to ideological domination of national and/or international power blocs. But whether we define the 'people' as agents or dupes, we have to address the complex nature of the 'people's' (and our own) complicity with popular cultural forms. Thus, within the theoretical framework of the popular and its relationship to ideology, the question of PLEASURE is critical. This is a problem unfortunately given little room in policy studies that emphasize the omnipresence and power of the state over the individual agent of desire.

Luckily, the body fulfils more functions than the Body Politic. There are numerous sites and spaces, for instance, where the sexualization of the social takes place beyond the reach of the state. Dai Jinhua, Judy Farquhar and Tani Barlow's work illustrate examples that may fill in the programmatic gap of policy studies (Dai 2001; Barlow 2001; Farquhar 2001). At issue is the privatization of pleasure as a post-revolutionary phenomenon. More work in this line is called for if we are to complicate the issue of desire, consumption, and new social agents, and render a credible picture of the wide social spectrum on which the post-socialist country moves back and forth, with eruptive energies, between an articulate statist vision and the amorphous chimeras of the 'people's'.

Asking how we can develop a methodology and a critical vocabulary capturing the latter - the intangible private pleasures of improvisation - is to remind ourselves of what traditional policy studies cannot achieve. Only by combining the resources of cultural studies and policy studies can we develop a critical agenda that examines the



issue of structure/programming side by side with that of agency/improvisation. The complex social practices of post-socialist agents (these include individual agents as well as institutional agencies) can only be unravelled through the collaborative programme of 'critical policy studies'. Ultimately, the challenge for Chinese policy makers is to navigate carefully between the utopian and authoritarian drives of state socialism; and our mission as advocates of critical policy/culture studies is to anticipate an alternative model emerging out of socialism's utopian character while remaining vigilant over the contemporary variations of post-socialism's Medusa persona.

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## **Notes**

1. Their preoccupation with this myth may demonstrate, in some instances, a habitual embrace of dominant first-world theoretical discourses and, in other instances, a critical spirit against the totalitarian state at home and hence a conscious ideological commitment to Western liberalism, which takes as its mission the eradication of 'Oriental despotism/'
2. I am referring to the Malaysian government's attempt of luring foreign investment back into the country after the drastic measures it took to control the flows or flight of transnational capital in and out of the country. According to this new policy, investors will be able to withdraw their money from Malaysia immediately. But they will be subject to exit taxes. Percentages will be calibrated according to the duration that their money stays in the country. See New York Times (1999).
3. Among the few China scholars who challenged this logic is Australian scholar David S. G. Goodman. For an example, see Goodman (1994).
4. The debate over 'state capacities' of the 1990s China was triggered by a 1993 report written by Wang Shaoguang and Hu Angang 'Jiaqiang zhongx/ang zhengfu zai shichang jingji zhuanxing zhong de zhudao zuoyong, (Strengthening the Leadership Role of Central State in the Transition of Market Economy). Wang and Hu sound alarms about the weakening of the central state's fiscal capacity, which they argue, results in a series of chain reactions that diminishes the 'steering capacity', 'legitimacy capacity' and 'coercive capacity' of the government. Since its publication in 1993, this essay paved the way for the 1994 fiscal reform and provoked many debates in academic circles both in China and abroad. One high-profiled forum of debates can be found in Ershiyi shiji: A Bi-monthly (The Twenty-First Century), No. 2 (1994): 4-23.

5. 'Knowledge economy' is a term that has gained increasing popularity in 1998. It first surfaced when the 'information age' is said to have landed in metropolitan China. With the rise of purchasing power of Chinese urban consumers, the electronics industry flourished. Concepts associated with information-technological knowledge entered social discourses. Gates' 1996 visit to Shanghai further intensified the fever over 'knowledge as capital'. 'Capital' here is understood not as a symbolic token, but real cash. In 1998, when national universities such as Fudan University and Jiaotong University in Shanghai became stockholders of giant corporations and pumped their stock value dramatically, the 'knowledge economy' acquired a different valence and resurfaced as a powerful social discourse.

6. I am referring to the practices of daring consumers, such as Wang Hai in Beijing. Wang made the headlines of national news when he went store by store in 1996 to hunt for goods of fake brand names. He bought them all and then went back to the stores for recompense as the Law of Consumer Rights Protection stipulates. Debates over whether he is a hero or a rogue lasted for years. In the wake of the Wang Hai phenomenon, an avalanche of lawsuits was filed by consumers against corporations, companies, and retailers that manufacture and sell fake brand names and goods across the country. A nationwide campaign of consumer consciousness raising caught on.

7. This project of critical policy studies was envisioned by David S. G. Goodman (University of Technology in Sydney) and myself in 1999. Concrete plans about how to implement this vision are being discussed. It will start as a multi-year project, built around an annual workshop, evolving around an international and interdisciplinary team of scholars (based in different geographical locales) in sociology, political economy, cultural studies, cultural anthropology, women's studies, environmental studies, and history. Policies of interest include cultural, educational, social and economic policies.

8. Those communal services include appliance repairs, elder care and childcare, delivery, laundry, educational, and even occupational training services. See Beijing Youth Daily (28 June 1998).

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#### Appendix. Special terms

the big weekend 大禮拜

changing tracks 轉軌

civilized subject 文明人

commercial ethics 商業倫理

consumer 消費者

consumption 消費

corporatization 股份制

culture fever 文化熱

double leisure day 雙休日

economic subjectivity 經濟主體

fake brand names 打假

finance consciousness 金融知識

Five Miles Bridge 五里橋  
Hard Strike 嚴打  
intermediary 中介  
knowledge economy 知識經濟  
legalizing economy 法制經濟  
leisure culture 休閒文化  
men with deep pockets 大款  
modern consciousness 現代意識  
multi-level marketing 傳銷  
province 省, county 縣, township 鄉鎮, and village 村  
reform and opening [to the outside world] 改革開放  
secretary-mistresses 小蜜  
social efficacy 社會效益  
socially displaced 下崗職工  
state 國家  
state capacity 國家能力  
the street 街道  
street economy 街道經濟  
streets of electronic goods 電子一條街  
system 體制  
tertiary sector 第三產業  
'there are policies above, but counter-measures from below' 第三產業, 下有對策  
the unemployment of state workers 下崗  
urban citizenship 市民

### **Author's biography**

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