

Schwerpunkt | Tradition as governmental instrument for a “safer” China. *Xi Qu* As A Starting Point

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Abstract

Tradition plays an important part in China’s daily life and is the representative mark of the Chinese nation. As tradition has emerged more and more artistically in Chinese society, its political purposes seem to be tacitly omitted. Tradition, according to its appearance, presents itself sub-structurally as a political instrument, or rather, a governmental one. The issue of “governmental technology” or “the art of government” concerning modern western civil society addressed by Michel Foucault, along with his concept of biopolitics, is considered a post-1970s new paradigm for analyzing modern political governmental art, which puts its focus on the population as a whole, according a normalized biological process to achieve a sort of “governmentability” based on a rationally optimized mechanism.

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aesthetics in Chinese society and then try to demonstrate a tradition-based mechanism that helps maintain the sovereign power in China.

After the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Chinese government sought to break with the traits of this violent period. Compared to the brutality imposed upon traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution¹, contemporary China has entirely reversed the social character of tradition over the last four decades: Confucius has returned as a great teacher² and the revival of traditional traits has become an authorized part of city planning projects³. According to Rana Mitter's comment on modern China since the 1980s, "the Party and the people alike seek to rediscover their own heritage"⁴. However, this rediscovery by Chinese government requires new ways of presentation rather than a new discourse. Qing Cao notes on the discourse of the post-Mao era that "the iconoclastic cultural vandalism on traditions, however, altered the ideologies, tenets, identities and subjectivities, but not politics and poetics of the established discursive regime."⁵ It is a reasonable realization that Chinese tradition as a phenomenon cannot be solely attributed to ostensible governmental decisions, but something more substantial and inherent beneath the social and political nomos, which fundamentally regulates Chinese people and society. The question is, what renders tradition an indissoluble part of Chinese politics? Or more plainly, what is tradition in the context of contemporary China.

1. Rules and Punishment within the circle of *Peking Opera*

To answer the aforementioned question, it is helpful to first introduce a traditional Chinese theater form, *Peking Opera*, which we prefer to call a "safe" theater. Though this traditional industry might, due to its folkloric particularity, run anachronistically against contemporary Chinese society, it still provides a basic angle to elucidate how

¹ See: 横扫一切牛鬼蛇神 (*Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons*). People's Daily, 1st June 1966.

² Cf. Mitter, Rana: *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World*. Oxford 2005, p. 295-296.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cao, Qing: "Legitimation, resistance and discursive struggles in contemporary China", in: Cao, Qing/Tian, Hailong /Paul Chilton (Ed.): *Discourse, Politics and Media in Contemporary China*. Philadelphia 2014, p. 7.

the surveillance mechanism sub-structurally functions. As a kind of *Xi Qu*⁶, it has particular rules on and off stage, which fit into its regional sub-social-structure. Remarkably, the industrial rules of Peking Opera emphasize beyond even its performance aesthetics its potential as a surveillance mechanism. Of the hundreds of taboos and conventions that regulate the practitioners of Peking Opera, the off-stage taboos (后台禁忌) are especially illuminating. This kind of taboo regulates the social behaviors of the practitioners—describing forbidden conducts like “theft”, “embezzlement”, “forming cliques within the troupe” or “holding a gambling party”. Namely, “everything forbidden by the law is also forbidden by the theater troupes”⁷. On this aspect, instead of observing the state’s law, the practitioners of Peking Opera formed more a private ruling system.

The difference lies in a rulebreaker’s punishment: if a troupe member commits theft, they will probably not be turned in to the police, but instead receive corporal punishment from their master or, in severe cases, be banished from the troupe—the latter might possibly deprive them of their livelihood⁸. The punishment does not come from some certain individuals, for example, the master of the troupe, but comes from the very tradition, even sometimes the master personally does not want to punish their loving apprentice. The tradition of the industry becomes the only valid law that ought to execute the punishment, while the actual law from the state ceases to be active here.

There is a ghost-like tradition handed down through generations that requires the master of the troupe punish the rulebreaker and forces the rulebreaker to accept the punishment, believing it is deserved. In this case, the rules of the industry substitute the rules of the actual state’s law to punish the potential or actual lawbreaker. However, the practitioners rule themselves in most cases willingly according to the taboos, so that they in this way naturally keep themselves inside the state’s law even before they have to face it. Accordingly, beyond the forbidden zone of taboos, the

⁶ Xi Qu: “戏曲”, traditional Chinese theater. Xi Qu is the term that refers to all kinds of traditional Chinese theater forms.

⁷ Yu, Jiangang: *中国京剧习俗研究 (Research on the Customs of Peking Opera)*, doctoral dissertation. Beijing 2008, p. 73.

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 173-174.

theater troupes and their members can stay clean in- and outside the industry, which ensures the legitimacy of their business and on the social aspect presents their very activities as pure aesthetic products without political relevance.

We see from above a tight relation between the rules of industry and the state's law. This relation incubates a ruling model of theater that serves as an automatism to maintain the "state safety" with its subordination to the state's law. Therefore, the "managing activities" of sovereign power on the state has been distributed into sub-structural ruling systems. This tradition can be traced back to a more classical Chinese political model based on consanguinity and regional rural cultural tradition. The Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong discovered in the Chinese local politics that

[i]n a traditional agrarian society, although government rule may be dictatorial at the top, the force of that power does not penetrate rural areas to any great extent. In rural areas, government is very inactive, is really very weak. The relative absence of government in rural areas, however, does not then mean that local society becomes a place full of „citizens“ possessing equal rights and jointly participating in their governance.⁹

Fei keenly senses that local Chinese politics generates confusion. When the highest governmental power is disconnected from the local-level, the individuals do not possess democracy. Some power between them rules the people sub-structurally, which is why the government can calmly remain inaccessible to them but keep its sovereignty. "Rule by elders (长老统治)" is the name he gives to this power in between, which is based on an "educational power" executed by the elders of a society: "every older person possesses the power to teach, and thereby to impose a culture upon, every younger person"¹⁰. The elders represent conventionally the social rules of a local society and their existence is the very secure mechanism of social and cultural stability. What the government should do accordingly is nothing more than assigning the power to the local elders and the elders will fulfill the function of local management. And naturally, the tradition represented by the elders will not transgress the state's law¹¹. This ensures a politically reciprocal system between sovereignty and local sub-structures. In this classical Chinese model, we can find commonality with Foucault's awareness of a modern shift of governmental technology in *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

⁹ Xiaotong, Fei: *From the Soil, the foundations of Chinese society*. California 1992, p. 114.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 118.

¹¹ Cf. Ibid., p. 117.

Foucault's focus on the rationality of government shows a similar logic: "the rationality of the governed must serve as the regulating principle for the rationality of government"¹². But instead of pursuing an economic interest, in the Chinese model rationality becomes the pursuit of the glory that comes with fulfilling one's given duty ("本分") based on tradition¹³. As we see earlier in the industry of Peking Opera, this model can certainly not merely apply to the management of local societies but also becomes an indispensable part of the government for holistic social stability.

This model discloses the basic mechanism of tradition regarding governability. Nonetheless, due to its applicability to a relatively conventional social division of labor and its equivocal concept of interest (it is hard to define exactly whether the fulfillment of one's duty in every case is a pleasant thing), it is still not applicable enough for an account of the role of tradition in contemporary China. In contemporary China, the classical tradition has become more and more aesthetics/entertainment-oriented, and together with it, new traditions are generated. While we ascribe the root of tradition-based governmental regulation to the classical model, or rather, a rural model, we will next concentrate our discussion on the appearance of tradition in contemporary Chinese cities.

2. New tradition and tradition as novelty

Urbanity is the most important identifying characteristic of contemporary China. The new situation set by the city culture of the post-Mao age urges a reconfiguration of tradition's distribution. The ruling mechanism originated in the old tradition has converted to a new tradition according to the transformation of the society. In other words, tradition has mutated.

In education we can notice the bud of a new tradition in this era and how it unfolds its mechanism. The school-age children (6~15 years old) are supposed to get educated in school, which is legally called *Nine-year Compulsory Education* and "formalization

¹² Foucault, Michel: *The Birth of Biopolitics*. New York 2008, p. 312.

¹³ An extra example here we can give is the existence of chastity archway(贞洁牌坊) in China, which is a sort of memorial archway built for the widowed women who did not remarry so as to keep their chastity in local societies.

and legitimization of education". However, though people find this rule in the law, the first motive of schooling is never to follow the law, but more because of the slogan "knowledge changes the life"¹⁴ that prevailed first in the 1980s after *the Cultural Revolution* in China. Deng Xiaoping's government tried to distinguish themselves from Mao's. The importance of science has been brought to the front and declared that "science and technology is part of productive force" and the position of scientists should be reversed¹⁵. Therefore, the modernized education system has been highly legitimated for its purpose as a productive force in society. Accordingly, those young people gained higher positions (normally vocations with higher pay) in the society because of this new division of labor, which further stimulates mass desire for education. However, the growing mass interest made it at the same time possible for the ideological education to enter the field of knowledge as appendant. Patriotism, collectivism and socialism etc.¹⁶, like undertones of the institution, tacitly infiltrated and reformed the category of education. The new generation of Chinese population after 80s has thus gone through an "ideological turn" with a newly generated politico-educational tradition that shifts from compulsory politicized inculcation to interior spontaneous naturalization.

According to a statistic from the Chinese census in 2010, 120 million people over the age 15, apart from 50 million people who are illiterate, have completed the *Nine-year Compulsory Education*¹⁷: the majority of China's population have been through the political education discussed in the paragraph above. This new political tradition presents itself on every individual, as Carl J. Friedrich writes in *Tradition and Authority*: "A political tradition is, to repeat, a tradition concerning the political community, its values and beliefs. It includes habits and customs concerning the conduct of men as political persons"¹⁸. Once the people were turned into "political persons", the population self-regulates in the manner required by the government, freeing the government from the need to exert active control. This new tradition provides a new

¹⁴ A buzzword that appeared around 1980s.

¹⁵ See: Deng Xiaoping's speech at the opening ceremony of the National Conference on Science, in: Deng, Xiaoping: *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, vol. II (1975-1982)*. Beijing 2006.

¹⁶ *The education law of the Peoples Republic of China*: Article 6: The State conducts education among educates in patriotism, collectivism, socialism as well as in the importance of ideals, ethics, discipline, the legal system, national defense and national unity.

¹⁷ Census of population in China 2010, data from: National Bureau of Statistics of China.

¹⁸ Friedrich, Carl. J.: *Tradition and Authority*. London 1972, p. 114.

circle for the individuals to realize their value positively but restrictedly, like another “Rule by elders”.

Except for these newly formalized and legitimized traditions, convention presents itself more and more as an aesthetics-oriented spectacle within urban life. *Chinese calligraphy, Hanfu, Peking Opera, and costume dramas* are incarnations of tradition in the city. However, the suburban society based on consanguinity is now seemingly alien to the urban life, but the forms that remain are at least in the daily life fully aesthetic. But when the real tradition loses its value in the life of the urban population, how do the aesthetic forms survive? If the aesthetics forms haven’t died out, can we believe that the tradition itself never leaves the cities, but stays in another way?

We must notice that there are not only new traditions like ideologized education, but also conventional traditions that have been brought to the present with entirely different meanings from those of the past. These novel traditions place themselves always in a blur but not concrete tradition, which is a kind of tradition that identifies itself with the Chinese tradition but actually does not come from any specific historical period. With the impact of pop culture in urban life, it becomes the images that reflect what Chinese tradition should be nowadays, though they are not them. *Hanfu* is the most well-known example of this kind:



Abbildung 1+2: What is a Modern Hanfu?¹⁹

¹⁹ “What is a Modern Hanfu? 2020 China’s Fashion Guide”, <https://medium.com/@newhanfu/what-is-a-modern-hanfu-2020-chinas-fashion-guide-b8b28f93d742> (Accessed 25.02.2021).

as a part of the so-called Chinese new traditionalism from the beginning of 2000s on, this “traditional Chinese costume style” cannot be dated back to any period of Chinese history and it is a contemporary nostalgic style adopted by the participants of *Hanfu Movement*²⁰ to designate the costume style of Chinese tradition, which is still named as and identified with the Chinese tradition as a pseudo-tradition with imagined resemblance.

If “tradition” terminologically refers only to itself, the concept of tradition ceases to equal itself. A “tradition” like *Hanfu* can cut itself apart from history and appear in a temporal interval. The “tradition” comes into being only because it corresponds to the sovereign ideology, so that anything that suits the ideologically surveilling purposes may be taken to form a “tradition”. The “tradition” is somehow “tradition-ed”. Along with its configuration, its functions and purposes seem to be more classic: the people who wear *Hanfu* convert themselves to the belief in the novel tradition, while living within a multi-layer/performative/malposed traditional context.

Both aforementioned traditions try to aestheticize (or at least positivize) the new purposeful parts in order to tacitly fit it into the stable former ideology. Through aestheticization, the role of tradition in contemporary China becomes the pursuit of interest and not entirely principles and glories upon the people, which technically demarcates itself from the classical concept of tradition. But the governmental logic and mechanism based on it have actually never left the whole institution, and in this contemporary version of government it shows even more traits of “the art of government”, which refers to a modernized “rationality”.

With a supporting policy for a “resurrection of the traditional arts” in the art market and the Chinese government spares no efforts to propagate the beauty of the traditional arts. Accordingly, the Chinese people sustain somehow a “tradition of tradition” that in our opinion shares the same characteristics as the “panopticism” that Foucault coins in his *Discipline and Punish*, which forges a spontaneous subjection that “is born mechanically from a **fictitious relation**”²¹ and at the same time abolishes the

²⁰ The Hanfu movement (汉服运动) is a social movement seeking to revitalize traditional Chinese fashion that developed in China at the beginning of the 21st century.

²¹ Foucault, Michel: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York 1995, p. 202.

conspicuousness of sovereignty through the “faceless gaze”²² behind the beauty—where surveillance softly takes place. Thus, the subjects of tradition undergo a cultural anosognosia, which blurs the fine line between what they can have and what they are permitted to have. At this point, aesthetics and a “genetical” acceptability based on a cultural genealogy inevitably become one. This characteristic means the spectacles and the products of tradition can serve as a natural political instrument to surveil the civilian populace.

3. Traditional aesthetics under surveillance—Bio-aesthetics?

The surveillance tradition therefore becomes the sovereign tradition. In fact, the sovereign tradition here is not identified with a sovereign government but represented by it. By representing the tradition, the sovereign government of China has itself become a part of the Chinese tradition. Two kinds of sovereignties emerge within this misplaced identity. On the one hand, the people themselves follow the beautiful sovereign tradition as a custom or an aesthetic concept. On the other hand, when following the tradition, they behave as the state needs them to, meaning they have already acquiesced their identification to the state ideology, even though they do not realize it. This might explain the confusion in Western countries between the Chinese government and China itself: for the Chinese people, the Chinese government, namely the Chinese Communist Party, is China, and represents all images of China. Up to this point, the aestheticized tradition potentially acquires its full power to reopen the gate to the old ruled-by-elders society. A virtual aestheticized “kinship” has thus been built among the citizens, who get obsessed with their roles in a “theater of society”. And now as these “practitioners of theater” keep away from the taboos of their “troupe” like their predecessors, the state is undisturbed — a safer China.

Michel Foucault asserts with the concept of “police” that man “has an activity that must characterize his perfection and thus make possible the perfection of the state.”²³ That is exactly how tradition atomizes the population. Under the concept of tradition, the population is replaced by thousands of self-satisfying sub-structures overlapping and

²² Ibid., p. 214.

²³ Foucault, Michel: *Security, Territory, Population, Lectures at the College de France 1977-78*. London 2009, p. 322.

interwinding with each other. The wide range of tradition as a more natural mechanism vis-à-vis the sovereign government, in Foucault's sense, substitutes for the "population as a collection of subjects". Compared to this art of government, which Foucault subsumes under his biopolitics, we can imagine a "bio-aesthetics", which keeps its taste as aesthetics, but is swallowed as power.

This leads to the ultimate dilemma concerning aesthetics for those aligned with tradition: if traditional art can only keep its original, unique sense of aesthetics in the context of power, its aestheticization is inevitably politicized. On the other hand, if the traditional arts are depoliticized, can it still be aesthetic? Or, perhaps, the depoliticization is right a de-aestheticization. The ultimate question this dilemma leaves is, is the resurrection of tradition for the Chinese people possible in a purely aesthetic sense? The traditional panorama for the Chinese is entirely different from that for persons outside of the Chinese cultural context. What Brecht saw as *Verfremdung* in traditional Chinese theatre has not been seen by Chinese theater practitioners for hundreds of years. If, under the critique of its political contents, the traditional Chinese aesthetic becomes unbearable, how is it possible for the Chinese to build a new concept of aesthetics outside of surveillance?

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