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1

CREATIVE HUMAN CAPITAL

Will Marxism not destroy a creative impulse? It will; it will certainly destroy the creative impulse that is feudal, bourgeois, petty bourgeois, liberal, individualistic, nihilistic, art-for-art's-sake, aristocratic, decadent, or pessimistic, and any creative impulse that is not of the people and of the proletariat.

—MAO ZEDONG, TALKS AT THE YAN'AN FORUM
ON ART AND CULTURE

This book considers the return of the creative impulses (and practices) that Maoists once sought to destroy. It describes how ideologies of creativity and practices of self-styling contributed to the formation of a variety of bourgeois, liberal, individualistic, decadent, and pessimistic subjectivities. Creative practice changed as teachers who began their professional lives in state-assigned work units prepared their students to enter “free” labor markets. Recent generations of Chinese art students have had to learn to perform creative personality and sell style, as they progress from art school entrance test preparation to art school and to work in the culture industries. Their efforts to fit creative individuality into markets in aesthetic commodities have been framed by the opposing forces of global commodity culture and nationalist state ideology, with by the dream-worlds of developmentalist utopias, and by postsocialist disenchantment.¹

Chinese “reform and opening up” (*gaigekaiifang*) was defined by new industries rather than new political organizations: economic transformation without structural political change. As many scholars have argued, the culture industries played a central role in the development of Chinese

market socialism or “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” by shaping commodities and stimulating consumer desire.² From 1978 to 2008, culture industries proliferated. Print and television advertising interpellated new consumers; film and television programming publicized new imaginaries.³ Artists and designers working in fashion and packaging, graphics, film and television, animation and gaming, architecture, interior, landscape and urban design transformed material culture and the physical environment.⁴ Contemporary art spread from tiny clusters of apartment-galleries to huge gallery districts in Beijing and Shanghai, now recognized as major centers in the international art world.⁵ Traditional-style Chinese ink paintings (*guohua*) command an enormous prestige market within China, and highly trained Chinese realist painters provide the labor force for the global market in reproductions and made-to-order portraits.⁶ Culture industries reflexively communicate their importance to Chinese publics through every medium: advertising, television, film, fashion, product design, and art.

Many observers regarded the growth of these industries as a spontaneous “market” process: an explosion resulting from the relaxation of state controls on culture. However, in a number of respects the formation of the cultural industries was facilitated by state interventions, including investments in export-oriented film production and urban art districts.⁷ This book argues that state-run (though not always completely state-controlled) art and design schools formed the foundation of China’s cultural industries, reproducing creative “human capital” (*rencai*) and “incubating” aesthetic communities and networks of culture workers.⁸ The Chinese education system has often been described as an obstacle to creativity. This book shows how Chinese art students and teachers have practiced creativity—and other types of socially privileged agency—within this system.

Beginning in 1997, the Chinese government embarked on a dramatic expansion of higher education, with the goal of moving beyond manufacturing to develop a “knowledge economy” or “creative economy” in which value is produced through innovation, both techno-scientific and aesthetic.⁹ In the late 1990s and early 2000s the “creative economy” discourse became popular with urban and national governments throughout Asia, many seeking to develop export-oriented economies based on intellectual property.¹⁰ In the words of Li Wuwei, former chairman of the People’s Consultative Conference, “Develop the creative industries (*chuangyi chanye*) to promote economic transformation. Only by truly respecting and encouraging the creative industries to become a core industry, can China’s creative industries establish an international presence, and like the Korean wave that happened a few years ago,¹¹ let a Chinese wind blow around the world.”¹² In the

PRC, this policy discourse followed closely after the aesthetic reformation of the 1980s, the shift from state-socialist material culture to commodity capitalism. “Creation” (*chuangyi*, *chuangxin*, *chuangzao*) and “creativity” (*chuangzaoli*, *chuangzaoxing*, *chuangzao jingshen*) became key terms for state economic and education policy discourse just as the market economy made individual style into mass culture.¹³

By 2009, of the nearly nineteen million students in Chinese universities, over one million studied art and design, outnumbering students in the fields of science, math, education, economics, law, and agriculture.¹⁴ In the decade from 1998 to 2008, universities around the country established hundreds of new art and design programs; central and provincial art institutes established new departments such as video game design, urban design, multimedia, and experimental art; the “eight big art schools” increased to nine, when the former Industrial Art Academy became the Tsinghua Academy of Art and Design, housed at the nation’s most prestigious scientific and technical university; and all the major art schools, as well as many minor ones, built new massive, state-of-the-art campuses (many with flagship buildings designed by famous architects) to house their expanding student bodies. By the late 1990s, most Chinese art students were no longer assigned state jobs, instead graduating into labor markets as entrepreneurs, freelancers, and wage workers. They took up careers across the spectrum of China’s contemporary social order, with different relations to the concept of creativity and the commodity mode of production.

Students preparing for entry into art academies have long come from a surprisingly wide range of class and regional backgrounds, from rural families that sell grain for tuition to wealthy elites seeking safe harbor for their less academically motivated children. In between these extremes lie families who claim long lineages of artists and art teachers. Their investments in art education—from the years of expensive training in test prep schools, to tuition, to support in their years after graduation—are enormous. Schools are sites in which multiple generations interact and frequently conflict: where teachers who grew up in a monologic state culture and were assigned to their jobs upon graduation prepare students born into a world of global commodity circulations for “free” markets in aesthetic labor. Nearly everyone involved in every field of visual culture, from high art to fashion to architecture, has studied in an institute of art or design (and trained in realist drawing and painting to gain admittance to those schools). Because Chinese universities generally pay teachers a spartan wage, art and design professors are almost always practicing professionals, relying on work in the market for much of their income. Consequently, art schools constitute a world of

intersecting communities far beyond the narrow fields of fine arts or design, and offer a viewpoint on the much larger field of culture work.

Artists (*yishujia*) and designers (*shejishi*) occupy newly prominent positions in the nation, as model producers, consumers, and citizens/subjects. As paragons of what Richard Florida called the “creative class,” artists and designers often figure as models for aspirational fantasies in television series and movies aimed at young audiences.¹⁵ Chinese publics are now more often invoked and addressed as consumers (*xiaofeizhe*) or citizens (*guomin*, *shimin*) rather than workers or producers. But members of the “creativity industries” (*chuangyi chanye*) are represented as elite producers of value in bureaucratic discourses and policies that extol the importance of cultural industries.¹⁶

Culture workers are alternately framed as vital for and antithetical to market socialism: on the one hand, they are the consummate stylish subjects, producing the endless streams of aesthetic forms that mobilize conspicuous consumption and planned obsolescence, and through which others practice self-styling. On the other hand, in a variety of contexts, artists, designers, filmmakers, and other culture workers represent themselves as pursuing an aesthetic value that transcends markets. Many of them express resistance to commodification and to the restrictions of the state, disaffection for the present and nostalgia for the socialist past. Art school graduates produce mainstream commercial and official cultural products, from advertising to propaganda, but also (albeit more rarely and on a smaller scale) forms of counterculture, dissent, and critique. Because of these dual roles, art and design schools offer a unique site in which to examine the contradictions of what Kellee Tsai called “capitalism without democracy.”¹⁷

While focusing ethnographically on small and relatively marginal communities of designers, artists, drawing teachers, and art students, this book traces the broad contours of the ideas of selfhood (*ziji*, *zishen*), personality (*gexing*, *xingge*), and individuality (*gerenzhuyi*), and their many imagined relationships to a marketized economic system in contemporary China. In the following sections, I outline the four major themes of the book—creative practice, self-styling, aesthetic community, and postsocialism—then summarize the chapters and their specific contributions to these arguments.

PRACTICING CREATIVITY

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese progressive reformers contrasted Chinese traditionalism with Western modernity, defined by aesthetic and technological innovation.¹⁸ Maoism extended and

reframed this binary, celebrating an anti-capitalist version of technological modernity while emphasizing anti-imperialist self-reliance and national pride. The advent of creative human capital discourse in the late twentieth century coincided with a post-Tiananmen discourse of remembering imperialist national humiliation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, policy officials and publics in China echoed their foreign critics in framing creativity as a particular weakness for China, a problem extending far beyond the professional fields of art or design. The following anonymous questions, addressed to an anonymous public through the ask function on Baidu, China's (once) primary search engine (an early form of internet discourse), illustrate the stigma that surrounds the topic of creative lack:

“Why is it that Chinese people are always producing (chuangzao) but never innovate (chuangxin)? No creativity (chuangzaoli). Why are we always taking tests and examinations,¹⁹ and in the end copying technology and ideas (chuangyi) from developed countries. I just don't believe Chinese people can't think of new ideas . . . I am in the third year of college. Everyone around me is testing for grad school, and I feel sorry for them. They are just testing for a job, but I want to pursue beauty. I want to pursue knowledge.”

Best Answer: “Only with educational reform can the country develop.”
(Baidu web forum, December 1, 2010)

“Is it true that Chinese people lack creativity? Is there a way to fix it? How can creativity be cultivated?”

Best Answer: “From the Nobel prizes, you can see that it is true. The problem is Chinese people are too conservative; there's no reason for this, no way to cultivate it. If you want to fix it, go tell the Party Chairman to switch to an American-style lifestyle, or else you can try yourself to invent something.”

Other Answers: “It has a lot of truth. The problem is the educational system. If you want to fix it you have to start from infants, to improve their independent thinking and creative thought.”

“It's not that Chinese people don't have imagination. Imagination is something every person is born with, and afterwards the way that education releases (*fahui*) imagination is very important. Chinese education pays too much attention to foundations (*jichu*), reading

writing and arithmetic, but doesn't give students space to freely imagine. The onerous pressure makes children lose their childish heart (*tongxin*) and at the same time lose their imagination (*xiangxiangli*).” (Baidu web forum, February 10, 2011)

In these conversations, echoing many that I heard in my fieldwork, the “problem” of Chinese creativity is drawn broadly. These commentators bemoan China’s lack of creativity in culture, technology, science, and so on compared to developed countries. They explain this lack in the following terms: stunting or loss of early childhood imagination and freedom leads to utilitarianism (e.g., testing to get a job as opposed to pursuing beauty and knowledge), which leads to theft or copying of intellectual property, and ultimately to deficiency in key international competitions such as the Nobel Prize. According to this discourse, creativity is a mental faculty developed in early childhood. But the examples of fully developed creativity adduced here are all professional: Nobel Prizes, key industries, technology, science, popular culture, media, design, and arts. In these quotes, deficits in such international competitions are ultimately blamed on China’s test-oriented education system (see figure 1.1).²⁰ These self-criticisms echo the racist rhetoric of Western politicians and pseudoexperts: “I’ve been doing business in China for decades, and sure, the Chinese can take a test; but what they can’t do, is innovate.”²¹ “East and West work differently in relation to design and innovation because of differences in cultures.”²² “[In China] creativity and innovation tend to occur only in increments rather than in large, dramatic changes as in the West.”²³

Both anonymous Chinese netizens and prominent American critics reference China’s international reputation as a country of copies and fakes, a country of violators of intellectual property law. Of course, many other countries produce counterfeits, but no country is as widely and invidiously associated with the practice as China. Not all copies violate intellectual property law, but accusations of copying blend in transnational imaginations with ethnic stereotypes and corporate legal battles that followed China’s entry into the WTO. As Laikwan Pang and Constantine Nakassis (among others) have argued, all cultural production cites, repeats, or responds to prior cultural forms, and copying is often creative.²⁴ Nevertheless, copying continues to be represented both within and outside of China as a cultural and institutional tendency antithetical to creativity, while creativity is regarded as a national resource crucial to global geopolitical and market competition.



FIGURE 1.1 “Education must face modernity, face the world, face the future”: Teacher parking lot of Zibo Technical Arts High School.

Creative practice in China is framed by three transnational discourses on the economic and political powers of creative individuals. There is, first, an ethno-national discourse of economic and cultural competition between Asia and the West (or China and the United States), according to which major powers need creative subjects to compete in “innovation” and intellectual property. Second, there is the liberal discourse of economic development, which in China takes on a pseudo-Marxist aspect of historical stages, or what Liu Xin calls “a great chain of modern becoming, a hierarchy of a developmental order of being.”²⁵ The production of creative individuals is central to the Party-state’s effort to transform China from an industrial producer to a creative designer, in order to reach the next stage of economic development.²⁶ And third, there is a political discourse that describes creative individuals as having a liberatory potential in a repressive environment—the capacity to live differently, if not always to effect political change.²⁷ Through these discourses, the Chinese government is called upon to produce creative subjects, while Chinese creative subjects are tasked with producing forms of value that are simultaneously economic, political, and ethical.²⁸

The protean character of creativity is central to its ideological significance in “new economies,” where according to theorists and policy makers everything is always changing, workers must be “flexible,” going from career to career, “learning to learn” throughout their lives.²⁹ Insofar as creativity is conceived as a fundamentally undisciplined mode of response (the creative worker, faced with a problem, thinks of a new, innovative solution), it fits into the transition from the model of “discipline” to the model of “performance.”³⁰ Like a skill, creativity is regarded as a psychological faculty embedded in an individual human mind-body. However, creativity is imagined not as a routinized form of knowledge, but as a quality of mind: an essentially unconscious, unlimited power. Unlike most other skills or forms of knowledge, creativity is thought (following Piaget) to develop best in very early childhood. As a result, cultivating creativity has become the paramount goal of elite preschools around the world, while secondary and tertiary institutions seek to unleash creative powers formerly repressed.

Laikwan Pang has argued that in China, as elsewhere, creativity is a trinity: a fundamental problem of modernity, a form of labor (the “authorial” work of producing ideas), and a legal regime of authorial property rights, a way of retaining claim on the value of intellectual property.³¹ Many of the chapters of this book are primarily concerned with creativity in its second aspect: as a constellation of practices, learned through practice. The most ambitious art students seek to use creative labor to generate authorial value: to be recognized as “creators,” or as people who “do art” (*gao yishu*). Like culture workers everywhere, they often have to choose between work that earns money and work that generates authorial value. However, when there are regimes to protect the authorial value they produce, these are more often social than legal (and often fail).

Insofar as the practice of creativity is the pursuit of a self, it is—as Pang argues—a way of becoming “modern,” in a world where “global modernity is characterized by the hegemony of a particular Western thinking.”³² In discourses of creativity, the creative subject, partaking of all the values of modernity—freedom, individuality, knowledge—stands at the nexus of cultural and economic development. On both sides of the Pacific, politicians, education officials, and pundits describe creativity as one last mode of production eluding China, for now retained by the United States.³³ In both countries, creativity is regarded as an extremely valuable form of human capital, defined by an aesthetic subjectivity as much as if not more than a technical skill: the “creative class” is valued as much for its consumption behaviors as its productive capacities.³⁴ This belief in the economic value of creativity is

combined with the implicit assumptions that creativity can be taught, or at least encouraged, on a mass scale (unlike, for example, genius), and that it is the responsibility of national education systems to inculcate it (as opposed to identifying a small number of people who are inherently creative). The Chinese education system has been widely blamed for its supposed failure in this responsibility, while in the United States critics of high-stakes testing have suggested that education reforms oriented to competition with Asia threaten American creativity.

In this context, how do Chinese art schools teach creativity to students who are regarded by their teachers, not to mention by education theorists and policy makers around the world, as singularly uncreative? How do teachers who grew up in what is now regarded as a singularly uncreative cultural system predicated on state control go about fashioning themselves as creative pedagogues?³⁵ How do adolescents who view themselves as having been warped by the very training that got them into those schools learn to practice creativity? How are Chinese art students—members of an increasingly large mass—asked to “find themselves” in order to produce value for others (an audience, society, the nation, etc.) (see figure 1.2)?

This book answers these questions using the methods of semiotic anthropology, rather than developmental psychology. I treat creativity as a social role and mode of being that art students learn to perform in what Erving Goffman called “interaction rituals” and Hanks called “discourse genres.”³⁶ Much as MBAs learn to be managerial or RNs learn to be caring, BFAs and MFAs learn to perform creativity in the classroom, in meetings and presentations, exhibitions and lectures, interviews and personal statements.³⁷ Just as some MBAs are more managerial than others (and some nurses more caring), some art students are recognized as particularly creative, by both teachers and classmates. These students perform creativity by generating a recognizable self in and through a *style*: a multimodal complex that links modes of speech and behavior, texts and verbal narrative to plastic and graphic form.

As Judith Irvine has argued, style—both linguistic and not—“crucially concerns distinctiveness; though it may characterize an individual, it does so only within a social framework (of witnesses who pay attention); it thus depends upon social evaluation . . . and interacts with ideologized representations.”³⁸ Other skills and forms of knowledge learned in art school—such as painting, carving, or printmaking—index belonging in a tradition and community, but creativity sets a person apart. In order for art students to be regarded as creative by others, they must represent themselves as unique individuals with a “unique” but recognizable style. Like a brand, this usually



FIGURE 1.2 *Neibua* anime self-portrait, by a high school student at Zibo Technical Arts High School.

involves attaching a recognizable and repeatable graphic element—such as Pollock’s drips or Picasso’s figures—to a proper name and a persona or character.³⁹ This character can be “animated” in ways that allow it to circulate independently of the artist or designer through exhibitions, art objects, images, and commodities.⁴⁰ However, unlike a corporate brand, style in contemporary art and design is supposed to index an individual personality composed of “unique” experiences and sensibilities, as well as broader social conditions that can be framed as sources of transcendent meaning.

SELF-STYLING

Creativity is the anchoring center of the broader culture of self-making through style: its ideological basis and authorizing force. It is the form in which the “regime of self” becomes a means (and mode) of production.⁴¹ Self-styling was crucial to *gaigekaiyang*; aesthetic self-consciousness was one of the constitutive elements of postsocialism. With the rise of a market economy, clothes, hairstyles, watches, food, cigarettes, liquor, entertainments, cars, and apartments were aestheticized and subjectified, made to serve as extensions, reflections, and icons of a consuming individuality.⁴²

Over the past four decades the culture industries have continuously transformed the qualia (or perceived qualities) of everyday life: colors, textures, shapes, tastes, and sounds. Art school graduates are now involved in every aspect of material life; not just film, television, art, advertising, and clothes, but also the packaging that surrounds food and household goods, the signs attached to all the buildings. There is no clear line between style and substance, between the visual culture industries and industries as such; the cosmetics industry relies on graphic designers and videographers as much (if not more) than chemists. The aestheticization of the world required and engendered a new kind of aesthetic subjectivity: an interest in style, a susceptibility to the attractions of commodities, a desire for contemporaneity and anxiety about lacking it, a habit of looking at and making small talk about commodities and their appearances. Shopping has become a pastime, whether on the street, in a magazine, or online.

Culture workers generate value in part by cultivating an aesthetic subjectivity and identifying an “individual” self. Personality is projected into style through dialogues, performances, and narratives, in face-to-face interactions and texts (such as brochures, critical essays, websites).⁴³ In this way, projects of aesthetic self-styling are crucial to creative practice. Culture workers may not keep the “selves” they construct in art school—they often remake their styles, or as Liu Xin puts it, “become other.”⁴⁴ But these successive remakings depend on a proficiency in self-styling.

The links between aesthetic form and social persona that artists and designers construct can persist as a style is reproduced and marketed, coming to serve as models for the “self-styling” efforts of others (colleagues, consumers, admirers, etc.). This is not to say that only credentialed artists and designers innovate aesthetically; visual culture workers often pick up on associations between style and social persona made by nonprofessionals, as Vivienne Westwood took up the clothing and hairstyles that first appeared

“on the street” in the early punk scene.⁴⁵ But as professionals involved in the industries of promotion and reproduction, their self-styling practices are systematically reproduced—or conventionalized—even without name recognition.⁴⁶ For example, Westwood’s version of punk style, as worn by the Sex Pistols, became the model for generations of teenage rebels (including one in Beijing now), many of whom were not aware of the role that she played in creating the genre of their own self-styling.

It goes without saying that such selves and styles are inevitably framed by socioeconomic distinctions. As Bourdieu has shown, the elite university reproduces class by certifying authorial privilege.⁴⁷ In the contemporary Chinese context, as in late twentieth-century France, creativity is a discourse that often reinscribes and conceals what Bourdieu regarded as “objective” class categories, such as the distinction of urban and rural deployed in the nationwide education movements and policy initiatives aimed at “improving the quality” of the Chinese people (*tigao suzhi*).⁴⁸ Many conflicting evaluative frameworks and hierarchies are invoked through aesthetic distinctions: not only *suzhi* or “quality,” and not only class or “social level” (*jieceng*), but also gender, regional background, generation, ethnicity, discipline, and aesthetic community.

Self-styling is ideologically overdetermined, enacting both creativity and individuality—key forms of subjectivity in capitalism. However, commodity culture is by no means produced only (or even primarily) through processes directed toward the self. In professional life, art and design work is often directed toward others, addressing an imagined audience or clientele. Some areas of culture work (such as fine art) systematically conceal their attention to market demands, while others (such as domestic architecture) foreground it.

One night in 2008, I was on the new Number Five subway line headed home to a village-turned-suburb outside the northern Fifth Ring Road. It was after ten o’clock, but the train was full of young people in their twenties and thirties, professionals in stylish clothes, many of whom had just gotten off work.⁴⁹ Just outside the Third Ring Road, I sat next to a man in his thirties, wearing a tasteful gray coat, black slacks, and stylish shoes. He pulled out a large fashion catalogue from an Italian brand. It was full of pictures of skinny blond models on the beach wearing loud, trendy, loose-fitting clothing. He looked at the pictures again and again, drawing increasing attention from myself and the woman seated on his left. Then he sighed and asked us, “What do you think of these clothes? Do you like them?” We both pointed out a few pieces that looked nice. He asked hopefully, “But how much do you think that skirt would cost?” The woman guessed four

hundred yuan. He said, “No, it’s a thousand yuan.” We looked nonplussed, and he flipped through the catalogue again. “Would anybody buy this for a thousand?” We looked doubtful, and he sighed again. “Looks like there’s no way to sell these things here,” he lamented. “Too expensive.” The woman said, “But these things aren’t really right for China anyway. Look how loose they are—foreign women are bigger.” She smiled apologetically at me. The train called out the man’s stop, and he put his catalogue away and said goodbye. This young man was engaging in idle market research on his way home (just as I was engaging in idle ethnographic research). In this conversation, the two of us willingly participated in his attempts to imagine a market in terms of a *type* or sociological category defined by the style of clothes and their cost. This reckoning was the inverse of the process through which designers design clothes to fit a type (e.g., a certain aesthetic, a certain income, a certain body shape). Such attempts at understanding others, from consultations with clients to large-scale statistical market research, form an essential part of the work of culture industries and of capitalism more broadly. These forms of imagination of markets and consumers—the parts of creative practice that are concerned with the styling of others—are beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless the certification to conduct these forms of labor depends on mastery of the intertextual and performative work of self-styling.⁵⁰ This book shows how self-styling is learned and authorized in art school, in classes that model the relationships between self and other, individual and society, and object and subject that students will have to negotiate in culture work, even as they insulate students from “market forces.”⁵¹

AESTHETIC COMMUNITY

Creativity is performed as a social persona. How you speak, how you dress, and how you interact with others may be as significant as the art (or design, etc.) you make. To be recognized as creative, all these aspects of self-presentation, as well as the aesthetic work itself, must be recognizable, and in that sense conventional.⁵² In art, design, film, advertising, and related fields of visual culture, developing a personal style is a process of socialization to *aesthetic communities*.

Like language communities, aesthetic communities share an orientation to a set of conventions: a “language” or code of colors, forms, materials, and genres. “Aesthetic community” bridges the gap between what Bourdieu called the professional “field” and what Hebdige called the “subculture.”⁵³ Aesthetic communities include constellations of artists and designers, teachers

and students, collectors, consumers, and admirers: all the people who are oriented toward a style, an aesthetic, a set of forms. Aesthetic communities cut across fields and professions; they include producers, consumers, and a host of intermediaries. But unlike what Becker called “art worlds,” an aesthetic community does not include all the people whose support is necessary to make any particular work of art. I use “aesthetic community” not to disrespect the work of janitors, landlords, babysitters, chemists, and computer programmers, but to exempt those who might not be aware of or care for the indirect products of their labor.

In linguistic anthropology, the “language community,” which is organized around a shared code or sign system, contrasts with the “speech community,” which is a community of people who actually interact with one another and share norms of interaction.⁵⁴ Likewise, aesthetic communities can include several “practice communities,” consisting of those who actually interact with one another in a professional field. There are often several overlapping practice communities within an aesthetic community. Some practice communities are organized around institutions such as schools, others through markets, and still others through kinship and social networks (or all of the above). There are, conversely, often overlapping aesthetic communities within a single practice community: for example, the contemporary art scene includes those who decorate their homes in gray and wear only black, and those whose art, clothing, and domesticity are eclectic and polychrome.

Because the ideology of creativity emphasizes individualism, in some aesthetic communities participants may be reluctant to identify with a label or to engage in explicit boundary work.⁵⁵ This is especially true of those who are involved in establishing the forms and standards to which such communities orient (prominent artists, critics, collectors, etc.). The conventionality of creativity is systematically erased by the performance of unique individuality.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, even in unnamed aesthetic communities there is a pragmatic recognition of belonging and a more subtle form of boundary marking characterized by a tendency to engage personally and professionally only with others in the same community while ignoring or mocking others. Like the shibboleths of voice (or “accent”), subtle aesthetic differences that provoke admiration or scorn map social terrains defined by the same axes of distinction that divide communities of practice: high and low, male and female, north and south, old and young, wealthy and poor, state and private.⁵⁷ In this way the semiotics of aesthetic community reflect and refract the underlying structures of contemporary Chinese society.

POSTSOCIALISM

Chinese creative workers played a central role in the formation of market socialism: in the formation of the visual culture industries and in self-styling. They were able to play such a central role because in the absence of substantive political reform, especially after the retrenchments that followed student movements in 1979 and 1989, aesthetic transformations were both pragmatically and ideologically central to China's transition from Maoism, or socialism, or a planned economy, to a market society.⁵⁸

Of course, it was precisely because Mao and other communist thinkers (like their contemporaries, the Frankfurt school theorists of capitalist aesthetics) recognized the role of “creative impulses” in producing bourgeois and individualistic subjectivities—and the role played by aesthetic styles in reifying economic inequalities—that so many socialist states sought to “destroy” these impulses. Early twentieth-century Chinese socialists regarded the practices of self-styling conducted in “decadent” urban centers as manifestations of capitalist individualism (*genrenzhuyi*). From 1949 to 1978, Chinese communism sought to eliminate the elaborately personalized, stratified, gendered, and sexualized styles that characterized elite life under prerevolutionary feudalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Just as Chinese socialist subjects were called on to resist desire for other bodies, they were also called on to resist desires for things.⁵⁹ Under socialism, the aesthetics of self was repressed through a series of rituals of sacrifice ranging from the traumatic to the banal, sublimating the individual in the collective. Even for those who did not experience famine, socialism enjoined ascetic self-denial: eschewing certain treats, foregoing certain pleasures cutting off long hair, destroying heirlooms and treasures.⁶⁰ Maoist campaigns frequently encouraged people to destroy all those seductive and elegant things that are now being lovingly re-created, not least in period movies and television shows about 1930s Shanghai.

The growth of the culture industries in China over the past thirty years has coincided with the growth of many other industries of desire. There is a general recognition that fashion and style are fundamental structures of capitalism. Despite worries about the moral effects of consumerism and commodification, for many people—especially those born after 1980—the space that aesthetics opens for self-styling is understood as a substantive freedom (*zìyóu*) linked to the relaxation of sexual mores over the same period.⁶¹ It is part of a broader expansion of the field of private, sensual experience that Farquhar calls “the indulgence of appetites”: food, wine, vacations, pedicures, sex.

Twentieth-century communist critiques of self-styling are now echoed by, among others, the anthropologist Yan Yunxiang, who accuses postreform Chinese society (and especially the postsocialist generations born after 1980) of a consuming self-interest.⁶² Likewise, critics of neoliberalism describe the choosing, selecting, self-serving individual as the fundamental structural unit (and ideological foundation) of neoliberalism.⁶³ In the 1990s and early 2000s, many scholars argued that Chinese postsocialism was really neoliberalism, echoing similar arguments about the Soviet Union.⁶⁴ However, the enduring power of the Communist Party, and of the state institutions that continue to organize many aspects of social and political life in China—not to mention state hold over key industries from banking to energy to media—have lately given credence to the Chinese government’s claim that the current system is “market socialism.” Contrary to the aspirations of Chinese liberals, the Chinese state shows no signs of releasing its control of media, culture, or education, and continues to invoke the ethics of socialism, leading scholars to search for alternatives to the phrase “postsocialism,” such as “late socialist neoliberalism.”⁶⁵

In the period from the mid-1990s up to 2008, contemporary art was allowed ever greater freedom of expression so long as it avoided pointed reference to politically sensitive questions.⁶⁶ Many exhibitions and performances that made critical reference to social problems—including some that are described in the next chapter—went on without incident. After 2008, a new phase began in the long-term, ongoing cycle of opening and repression that characterized both the Maoist era and the thirty years of reform. Censorship intensified and became more obvious, as “secret” bans on news topics issued to media became frequent topics of discussion; sensitive terms disappeared from the Internet overnight; and online forums were overrun by the so-called fifty-cent party of state shills posting progovernment talking points. Events such as concerts and film screenings and gallery exhibitions were canceled more frequently. Small events were canceled with threatening visits from *chengguan* and Public Security Bureau officers unknown to anyone but their organizers, while large events were shut down in ways that demonstrated the new limits to a general public.⁶⁷ Xi Jinping’s media-savvy party leadership promoted a heavily branded “Chinese Dream” while simultaneously relying on more traditional methods of cultural control such as arrests and disappearances.

Although Western observers initially took the Chinese culture industries as harbingers of revolution, it is now clear that those industries have not threatened the party’s power. Nor have the culture industries eliminated

official culture, from propaganda to state news to academic art. Many culture industries are tightly linked to the state, and most culture workers are employed by hybrid entities: as graphic designers who print banners for both local city governments and corporate events, architects who work on projects organized by state-owned but nominally private real estate firms, or artists who hold teaching jobs at state institutions.

The state wields considerable powers (ideological, technological, carceral), but these powers are not absolute. Chinese cultural politics is a dialogic cacophony, full of side talk and back talk, across media platforms and physical spaces.⁶⁸ The admittedly permeable firewall that prevents access to Facebook and Twitter, and the more impenetrable wall of language, sets bounds to this dialogue. As chapter 4 of this book demonstrates, Maoist genres and styles are still part of Chinese public culture, albeit in more or less modified forms. On the other hand, wealthy and/or educated Chinese increasingly participate in transnational circuits of commodities, texts, and persons: from fast fashion, luxury, and technology (made in China, but “designed in California”) and milk products imported from pastoral paradises such as New Zealand, to rapid translations of news items and viral videos, to increasingly easy-to-obtain travel visas to the United States and Europe, which in the past ten years have given an expanding class of Chinese urbanites personal access to New York, London, and Paris. These forms of commerce map networks of aesthetic communities and practice communities that cross boundaries of language and nation.

If the Maoist aesthetic—tin cups, sturdy cotton clothes, simple bob haircuts, cloth shoes—was suffused with transparent political meaning, the political implications of contemporary rituals of self-styling are less clear. This is particularly true of the nostalgia for socialist aesthetics, which figures in everything from official propaganda to contemporary art exhibitions to indie rocker fashion to television soap operas. These overlaps produce ambiguities: is this the voice of the state, of commerce, of the avant-garde? In liberal-democratic societies, some aesthetic communities are aligned with political ones; you might be able to tell how others vote by the way they style themselves. But in mainland China, politics (usually translated as *zhengzhi*, a word that might be better translated into English as governmentality, since the Chinese state itself has a Foucauldian view of the diverse strategies of governance) is not clearly articulated as an identity category that typifies individuals or social roles. Opinions on questions of policy cannot be readily used to assign individuals to political camps or categories aligned with other sociological distinctions (the way that green and blue are aligned with heritage

in Taiwan, or red and blue with urban and rural in the United States). Instead of being attributed to politics, differences in ethical sensibilities or attitudes toward the state are often described in terms of differences between the generations (*-dai*, measured by the decade of birth) that are used to figure historical change, or between social categories such as urban and rural. Consequently, to examine the politics of self-styling we must pay attention to *stances*: ways of indexing alignments with, against or outside of the ideological and aesthetic fields of governmentality.⁶⁹

To the extent that the practices of self-expression and self-actualization made possible by *gaigekaiifang* have contributed to the development of avant-garde art scenes that have, at various moments in the past thirty years, been involved in political dissent, aesthetic freedom seems to offer possibilities of resistance. On the other hand, in many contexts anti-mainstream (*feizhuliu*) fashion is devoid of any specific political meaning. To describe the politics of self-styling in China, I offer a series of analyses of the many ways that Chinese artists and designers position their creative practices: as a field for publicly asserting antiauthoritarian and liberal forms of sovereignty; as a contribution to the ethno-nation and its status and influence; and as field for private, apolitical, individualist self-satisfaction.

CHAPTERS

This book offers a critique of creativity through a series of ethnographies of creative practice in China: the test-focused art education that is said to suppress creativity, the state institutions and pedagogical forms through which creative individuals are produced, and the aesthetic communities constructed out of and through self-styling. These ethnographies alternate with a series of chapters using interpretations of artwork and media texts—from installation art to propaganda videos—to illustrate the contradictions of creative practice.

Chapter 2, “Thirty Years of Reform,” begins with an oral history of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, describing how the school changed over the course of *gaigekaiifang*. This institutional history is given a broader social context through interpretations of three art exhibitions commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of reform and opening up in 2008. These exhibitions offer perspectives on the legacies of socialism and the novelties of reform that are variously aligned with or critical of official state narratives, showing how contemporary Chinese dreamworlds contest with one another.

Chapter 3, “Art Test Fever,” examines the art test prep classes that are widely blamed for overproducing the wrong kinds of subjects, with neither

creativity nor style, making students who are “blind” and “aimless” (*mangmu, mangran*). This chapter describes the expansion and standardization of the art test system over the thirty years of reform as a result of tensions between families, profit-motivated test prep industries, and public institutions, showing the limits of education policies and ideologies of creativity in the complex social world of postsocialist China.

Chapter 4, “New Socialist Realisms,” considers the legacies of socialism in realist genres and political visions. This chapter explores the relationships between official and unofficial visual cultures by tracing the links between three contemporary genres of realism—art test prep realism, avant-garde realism, and official/academic realism. Following on the work of scholars who have argued for the persistence of socialist ethics in postreform China,⁷⁰ this chapter shows how all three genres represent icons of the working classes and express a postsocialist form of class recognition and an ethics of inequality.

Chapter 5, “Self-Styling,” examines the pedagogical forms through which students who matriculate to art academies after years of highly technical test prep are taught to practice creativity and “find themselves.” This chapter offers an ethnography of the discussion-based, “critique”-style “creativity classes” (*chuangzaoke*) that are a central part of university-level art and design curriculum. Building on the linguistic anthropology of pedagogy, this chapter describes how art students are taught to “entextualize” a style by narrating a self,⁷¹ performatively anchoring an aesthetic that is always drawn from the work of others in a unique and highly personal subjectivity. The chapter reflects on the political implications of this subjectivity and its forms of practice.

Chapter 6, “Aesthetic Community,” looks at how such distinctions and the communities indexed by them continue to shape the work of creativity beyond the school, examining the ways that categories of aesthetics, practice, and socioeconomics are contrasted and laminated in interactions between visual culture workers in studios, coffee shops, restaurants, and karaoke bars. This chapter shows how creative work is alternately aligned with and positioned against “the market” and the specter of commodification.

Finally, the conclusion returns to Gorky’s 1932 question: “On which side are you, ‘Masters of Culture?’” Examining the role of creative human capital in an urban service economy by analyzing a 2008 propaganda video titled “Reunion,” this chapter shows how the “creative class” is positioned intermediate to the socialist class categories of capital and labor. The culture workers who are supposed to transform the nation, the culture, and the economy with their innovative potential appear as labor to capital (in

the person of the client or collector) and capital to labor (in the person of working-class service providers). Their professional activities can be framed as either authorial power or subaltern service, depending on context. This ambivalence demonstrates the antinomies of class in China's already post-socialist, but increasingly postindustrial, political economy.

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