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How theatre is applied by the Chinese state for neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics? The role of Mass Entrepreneurship and Mass Innovation policies in a Jingju (Peking opera) Theatre Company

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ABSTRACT


Neoliberalism as it emerged from the West, has been localised when it entered China along with the global market. In the 2010s, a series of neoliberal policies under the mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation (MEMI) initiative were launched to support an entrepreneurial environment for Chinese theatres. To understand how the state applied neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics to Chinese (applied) theatre via the practice of MEMI policies, this paper acknowledges Althusser's theories of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and interpellation to demonstrate the construction of the ideological relationship between Chinese theatre artists and China's government.

KEYWORDS

Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics; Chinese Jingju (Peking opera); Ideological State Apparatus (ISA); Mass Entrepreneurship and Mass Innovation

Introduction

Emerging from the West, neoliberalism as an ideology emphasised its capacity for privatisation of public assets, deregulation of labour markets, and the active encouragement of competitive and entrepreneurial relationships across the public and commercial sectors (Gilbert 2013). In China, the Chinese Communist Party has sought to retain power by shifting politically to the right and promoting neoliberal-looking economic policies (Duckett, 2020, p. 523), which led to what David Harvey called 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' (Harvey 2005). To relate the neoliberal ideology to applied theatre studies, neoliberalism policies were often explored, as they represent the practice of economic participation by political institutions that would be able to resolve social and political problems (Thorpe and Yeh 2018, 10). In the 2010s, a series of neoliberal policies under the mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation (MEMI) initiative were launched to support an entrepreneurial environment for Chinese theatres. To understand how the state applied neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics to Chinese theatre via the practice of MEMI policies, this paper acknowledges Althusser's theories of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and interpellation to demonstrate the

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construction of the ideological relationship between Chinese theatre artists and China's government.

This paper starts with a review of the concept of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics by dividing the concept into two components, discussing the meanings of both neoliberalism in China and Chinese characteristics of authoritarianism. Then, the paper introduces Althusser's theories of ISAs to provide a theoretical rationale for acknowledging MEMI as an ideological practice. It also introduces Althusser's practical model of the 'duplicate mirror-structure of ideology' to the critical discussion of MEMI policies in the 2010s. Finally, based on the theoretical review and critical discussion of MEMI policies, it analyses the interpellation process of Quirky Moth theatre as a Xiao Juchang (little theatre) Jingju Company relative to the ideology of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics via MEMI policies.

Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics

To understand neoliberalism in a Chinese context, David Harvey claimed discursively that China, as a global economic power after the 1980s, was in part practicing an unintended consequence of neoliberalism as an ideology in the capitalist world (2005). Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has been practiced in China in both internal and external ways. Internally, China changed its previously strict governmental control by implementing reforms or 'transformations' regarding its social policies, corporate systems and market price systems, such as reforms in privatisation, dual-track pricing and urbanisation policies (Harvey 2005, 121–127). Externally, China's open-door policies of the 1980s increased its economic openness and established a Chinese connection with global neoliberalism by absorbing more foreign direct investments, Chinese overseas diasporic relations and foreign raw materials and energy (Harvey 2005, 135–143).

Harvey categorised China's neoliberal ideology as 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' (2005, 121). Chinese characteristics made neoliberalism a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporated neoliberal elements interspersed with authoritarian centralised control (Harvey 2005, 120). China chose to protect itself by maintaining an authoritarian control over the market by keeping state interventions and nationalist connections with the foreign diaspora. In Harvey's view, the Chinese characteristic of neoliberalism helped to shape China's own reflection of authoritarianism by recognising neoliberalism as an ideology opposite from China's ideological legitimacy. More directly, Wang Hui developed Harvey's 'Chinese characteristics' into two main categories: the coexistence of the state power structure and market principles, and the merging of state policy guidance and participation in the global economic system (Wang 2003, 3). Thus, neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics requires both a certain degree of freedom through the neoliberalisation process, such as marketisation or privatisation, and subjection to government authoritarianism.

In the dissemination of neoliberal ideology, diverse types of arts productions and cultural policies were applied by the state to embrace its explicit and implicit ideological objectives (Gilbert 2013, 12). To understand how these neoliberal objectives were applied in theatre via cultural policies, it is worth recalling Althusser's theories of ISAs and interpellation (1971).

ISAs and the interpellation model

In 1971, Althusser proposed two types of state apparatuses, repressive state apparatus (RSA) and ISA, to win legitimacy and support for the state and the way it functions (Andrews and Skoczylis, 2022, 7–8). RSA, as it contains the army, the police and the courts, is exercised by a state of violence, while ISA is exercised in nonviolent ways such as religion, education and arts productions that ‘covertly shape individual ideology’ (Xi and Ng 2021, 928). Even in an authoritarian regime, force is not the most efficient way to maintain power, so RSA is not frequently used. On the contrary, ISAs include large social institutions that train individuals to think in a certain way and bring ideology into every aspect of daily life (McGee 2014). This is because, to Althusser, ideology, as a set of discourses, images and opinions surrounding the condition of our lives (Sadjadi and Ahmadi-rad 2018, 205), represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. Thus, through ISAs, life skills and norms were then accepted and reproduced by individuals as they live in a condition that was created by the imaginary relationship of ideology (Xi and Ng 2021, 929).

Interpellation is Althusser’s theory to explain how the state used ISAs to recruit individuals to build up the imaginary relationship and bring it to individuals. After recruiting the individuals, Althusser believed that ‘all ideology hails or interpolates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by functioning of the category of subject’ (1971, 173). To demonstrate the function and operation of interpellation, Althusser focused on the dual meaning of the term ‘subject’: a subject representing the free subjectivity that can be responsible for its actions and a centre of initiatives, but also a ‘Subject’ who represents a subjected being who submits to higher authorities (Althusser 1971, 180). Subject is compatible with ideology, as it is ‘unique and absolute’ and resides in the place where ideology is located in the centre (Althusser 1971, 180). Althusser summarised the interpellation process into the model of ‘duplicate mirror-structure of ideology’ in the following four steps:

1. The interpellation of ‘individuals’ as subjects;
2. Their subjection to the Subject;
3. The mutual recognition of the subjects and Subject, the subjects’ recognition of each other, and finally the subject’s recognition of themselves;
4. The absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognise what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen – ‘So be it’ (Althusser 1971, 180)

The interpellation started by recruiting individuals and making them subjects who realised their subjectivity and self-actualisation. Then, through diverse apparatuses, such as educational, religious or artistic means, these subjects became submissive to a higher authority as a process of subjection. As we further our cognition or perception of the imaginary relationship between them and the real condition of existence (Althusser 1971, 174), human beings would gradually find that we are both subject and Subject as they are being interpellated. Finally, after analysing the contexts of ideology, these subjects/Subjects accept their dual identities and believe in what they are: the imagined conditions. The model is very useful and systematic in explaining how interpellation happens

under certain ISAs, as the model explains the functions and operations of the interpellation of ideology.

MEMI initiatives in China

ISAs and interpellation are often and widely used by China's government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as tools to project its ideology of authoritarianism in its tourism (Gao and Guo 2017), public spaces (Xi and Ng 2021), arts productions (Gao 2015) and many other fields. These include recruiting both Chinese overseas and diasporic artists to create arts productions that highlight traditional Chinese cultural elements (Gao 2015); creating supportive environments, such as tourism sites, to visualise CCP's history; or advertising iconic nationalist ideals in public spaces such as parks or side-street advertising boards (Xi and Ng 2021). Since 2014, Chinese authoritarianism has been represented in another economic-political initiative centred on neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics: MEMI.

On the neoliberalism side, MEMI was proposed by Premier Li Kzeqiang in 2014 to promote an entrepreneurial solutionism for exploiting market values to speed up China's long-term goal of developing its economy through technological innovations (Keane and Chen 2019). It means that MEMI policies would benefit China's overall GDP growth by encouraging a large group of talented people to explore their innovative potential via building up their own enterprises in the market.

For the Chinese characteristics of MEMI, though mostly invisible, government censorship and supervision were found in the process of ideological interpellation. Claimed by Gao and Mu, the state's ideological control over MEMI was evident in the Chinese government's goal of improving the capital market and expanding employment opportunities via commissioning entrepreneurial activities such as providing financial, educational, and administrative support for entrepreneurs (Gao and Mu 2021, 254). Among those government policies, the 'Opinion on Significantly Promoting Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation', issued in 2015, and the 'Guideline to Further Strengthen the Implementation of Innovation-Driven Development Strategy and Reinforce the Spirit of Mass Innovation and Entrepreneurship', issued in 2017, are the most significant, comprehensive, and representative (Gao and Mu 2021, 258). The 'Opinion' provided mainly administrative and financial support for mass entrepreneurs, such as simplifying the process of tax registration, widening business range, and establishing various funding for entrepreneurs. The 'Guideline' targeted people in higher education; it asked universities to set up entrepreneur incubators to support entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education and also asked for a mechanism for transforming research outcomes into commercial products. Via the execution of these policies, the Chinese government keeps its authoritarian control over a neoliberal entrepreneurial market as entrepreneurs are commissioned to work for the government's overall economic goal of GDP growth in exchange for support from the government (Mullen 2017).

Quirky Moth Theatre Company

To further understand how MEMI interpellated Chinese individuals into the ideology of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics, I introduce the following case study of a Xiao Juchang Jingju theatre company in Beijing: Quirky Moth Theatre Company.

Quirky Moth Theatre (QM) was established in 2016 by a group of graduates of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA) who are specialists in Chinese Jingju (Peking Opera). The theatre aimed to promote an affordable mode of Jingju production, which was widely known as Xiao Juchang (little theatre) Jingju. Xiao Juchang Jingju normally has specific targets, and a small market share compared with the large theatre companies in China that normally need huge financial investments or subsidy. As a Xiao Juchang theatre, QM acknowledged a wide range of practices under the ideological interpellations of the MEMI initiative.

The establishment of QM was under the influence of abundant entrepreneurial education resources in which individuals were recruited as subjects. The co-founders of QM, Mr Xuexi Li and Ms Tianjiao Liu, met each other when studying at NACTA, which has one of the largest entrepreneurship incubators and entrepreneurship education programmes for Jingju students and practitioners. This incubator was co-established under the student centre and the CCP's sub-branch at NACTA in 2012 as a reaction to China's pre-MEMI initiative, the 'Opinion on Significantly Entrepreneurship and Innovation Education and Higher Education Students Entrepreneurship' to set up a material condition for the MEMI in an educational context. Since its establishment, NACTA started an annual campaign of entrepreneurship competition, in which students, who had already registered start-up theatre companies or were about to do so, compete for better material resources as awards in a series of roadshows (National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts 2014). A wide range of entrepreneurship courses were delivered by NACTA, as it also set up a new undergraduate programme in cultural and art industry and management in 2011. Around thirty students have been admitted to this programme at the undergraduate level every year since 2011. QM was established under such a policy, where Xuexi and Tianjiao were immersed in this abundant entrepreneurial education resource. As individuals, Xuexi and Tianjiao were recruited by the ideology behind these resources as potential entrepreneurs.

It was not until 2016, when Xuexi and Tianjiao registered the company, that they completed their subjection to Subject of the ideology of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics. As Quirky Moth Theatre was registered as a for-profit company, it was engaged with the neoliberal market of China. Xuexi and Tianjiao formally and legally gained their identity as entrepreneurs. This identification made them subject to neoliberalism MEMI policies because now they had to think about making profits to sustain the company and earn income to survive.

However, as they went further in business, the difficulties of earning sufficient profits made them recognise their subjection to the Subject. There was no revenue from theatre productions in the next year after their establishment, and they needed to sacrifice some of their ideas to fit market demands. As they started to negotiate between a free subject and a submissive Subject under the market from 2016 to 2020, Tianjiao and Xuexi did many projects such as writing transcripts for TV dramas and organising cultural events to make a living. According to Althusser, when Xuexi and Tianjiao worked hard in response to these difficulties, they had already accepted the material conditions of the ideology and believed in what 'they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen – 'So be it'' (1971, 180). They went to where the ideology would like them to go. As a result, the Quirky Moth theatre became a part of China's MEMI 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' in which entrepreneurship was used to expand not only one field but also a

whole range of interrelated industries to achieve the national goal of comprehensive development of GDP growth.

Conclusion

The Quirky Moth Theatre Company is a good example of many small and medium-size for-profit or non-profit theatre companies in China that have been interpellated by the ideology of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics via a series of policies under the MEMI initiative. They were recruited as a subject by abundant educational support and became entrepreneur Subjects after formally registering their theatre companies. In the face of operational difficulties from market competitions, they gradually understood their dual identity of subject and Subject, became accustomed to the true conditions and behaved according to the ideology.

By quoting the theory of interpellation, the case study systematically reflects how Chinese government ideology has been applied by the state for its ideological end. But as a short piece, this paper still needs further discussion on many important ends of the state agenda, such as MEMI's capacity to reduce the unemployment of Jingju practitioners and the social contribution of artist-entrepreneurship to self-expression. All these aspects would need further social, political, and cultural consideration.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Xunnan Li is working at Business School, University of Leeds. He is also finishing his PhD in Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway University of London.

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