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Zhang Yimou's Impressions: adaptation, innovation and creativity in China

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Zhang Yimou's Impressions: adaptation, innovation and creativity in China

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ABSTRACT

In the traditional Chinese worldview new cultural models continually emerged as persons of qualified learning personalized formal practices, commented on texts and produced variations. In this paper I will show how a traditional Chinese perspective sheds light on current day creative industries. In today's world, information and communication technologies provide opportunities for ever-increasing variations and configurations. In the entertainment world particularly ideas circulate rapidly: they pass through stages of what we can call the 'dream cycle': invention, implementation, imitation, replication, saturation, degradation and satiation. Drawing on the Impressions series created by the 'impresario' Zhang Yimou the paper re-theorizes a Chinese creative innovation system, focusing on how ideas, technologies and creative works are generated, transformed, adapted, copied, marketed and disseminated. The implications of model this are that we are now seeing a model of creative innovation, one that we might call second level innovation, one that challenges the dominant Western model based on the concept of novelty and copyright. In effect, this gives rise to a utilitarian definition of creativity as: The fitting of new ideas and alternative visions to existing norms, values and patterns

Introduction

The idea of creative industries (and *inter alia* creativity) became one of the defining features of urban reform in China in the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century. As China now heads down an uncertain global road into the second decade of the millennium we might ask: what is the anticipated longevity of this discourse? Will it go down as a first decade fad or will it bring greater social transformation, opening China to what Prof. Li Wuwei from the Shanghai Academy of Social Science calls a 'creative society' (Li 2008)?

In this presentation I want to problematize the idea of creativity, both how it is used internationally (in the West) and in China. I am not doing this to undermine the idea of the creative industries, which I believe is important for China, but to shine a bit more light on what is a very grey area: where creativity actually begins and ends.

Almost all current definitions of creativity and innovation agree on the importance of three attributes: *newness*, *value* and *usefulness* (Rehn and de Cock 2010; Boden 2004). Of these three most attention goes to the first attribute, which is often expressed in legal texts, in the economics of innovation, and in cognitive psychology as 'novelty'. I believe the widely held assumption that originality and novelty are fundamental to the creative process is to some extent ideological. Creativity is not a neutral idea. This assumption predisposes us to think that what is old world/ old economy is in need of change and creativity is the means to deliver a better world—for instance manufacturing and processing industries are polluting while design is clean. In the programs that are built around the creative industries, particularly in China, we notice the rhetoric of value adding, social and industrial upgrading, and a happy workforce (Li 2008). But along with this comes a degree of unwelcome change: land is resumed, rents rise, and people move into what are very precarious occupations.

Despite the general celebration of novelty, the creative industries, as defined globally, are made up of practices, occupations, and commodities that are more often routine, frequently standardised and generally derivative. The fashion industry identifies its outputs as creative but its success comes from recycling trends and picking the right time to introduce these into the media. Television is endlessly repetitive: reality TV is frequently concerned with the mundane and the familiar. Formats dominate schedules. Creative occupations are also problematic: are pastry chefs creative? What about scientists; shouldn't we consider their outputs as creative even if they spend a great deal of time in labs? The discourse of the 'creative economy', which has had a positive reception globally, beginning with the 2001 book of the same name by John Howkins (2001), and extending more recently with the *Global Creative Economy Report 2008* (UNCTAD 2008), has led to a massive endeavour of designating creative occupations and creative goods and services, and then trying to associate credible value to their outputs.

The inclusion of non-creative activities in the UNCTAD Report has provided a license for countries and regions to expand the creative industries pie, which has in turn led to inflated data and the inclusion of dubious categories such as photographic plates, carpet manufacturing, antiques, toys,

and tourism. My preference for a global term is the 'cultural economy', ultimately a more serviceable option (Jeffcott 2010; Power and Scott 2004). The cultural economy allows for the inclusion of symbolic goods and services that are standardised, non-changing, particularly tourism artefacts and services, which currently constitute so much value in China and developing countries. It particularly allows for the inclusion of traditional craft items, whether authentic handmade goods or mass produced copies.

Of course we can always 'fit' these various associated pursuits into the cultural and creative 'big picture' by designating core and none core activities but even many core activities don't involve novelty; moreover, many show little evidence of originality. However, they can still be regarded as creative: we just have to downgrade our emphasis on newness. Taking all the products and services that are included in the policy reports, we observe a continuum: at one end of the continuum products are made to a certain preconceived specification; for instance assembly line manufacturing is generally considered uncreative. We might also include carpet making, garment manufacture and the outsourcing of animation here. At the other end of the continuum is originality, the much vaunted breakthroughs in style and paradigm; for instance Picasso's cube, Einstein's theory of relativity, and Lennon and McCartney's *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. In the middle and taking up a lot of the territory is 'proficiency' in various forms (which is useful but not so novel) and 'eccentricity' (which is novel but not so useful) (Moran 2010).

In effect, I want to argue that we need a more serviceable understanding of creativity. The definition that I propose is: The fitting of new ideas and alternative visions to existing norms, values and patterns: Such 'fitting' encompasses invention, differentiation, adaptation, learning, and diffusion. To show why this understanding better suits the world we live in, I will briefly discuss the recent work of the renowned Chinese film maker Zhang Yimou before returning to my thesis that the emphasis on novelty and originality is a Western misconception.

Zhang Yimou and the Impression format

An ironic sequence appears in a recent Chinese film. *Welcome to Sharma Town* is a comedy about a poor Chinese village in north-western Gansu Province where the local mayor is looking for an opportunity to generate economic outcomes for the community. While the narrative is complex, involving investors, salt of the earth locals, petty criminals and a feisty romantic relationship, the

basic idea is a scheme to cash in on a reputed bandit treasure and to build publicity through a tomato festival. The major has the sudden idea that a certain Mr. Zhang will be willing to come to the village and construct a spectacle that will attract tourist by the thousands. This would be called *Impressions Sharma Town*. In one of the final scenes of the movies we see the major receiving a phone call from this mysterious Mr. Zhang.

A celebrity entrepreneur with an international profile, Zhang Yimou is often portrayed in the Chinese media as a 'creative model', offering a road map for others in their search for success. If Zhang himself is regaled as a 'model', then his productions can also be viewed as following models. This is nowhere more evident than in the *Impressions* series. Here the model is a distinctive and recognizable aesthetic format linked to the global lifestyle trend of eco-recreation. Although eco-recreation is a contemporary marketing strategy, usually responding to the aspirations of affluent social groups, it has deep roots in Chinese traditional values and therefore has appeal to a broad cross section of Asian cultures. Added to this mix of aesthetics and outdoor scenery is Zhang's propensity for extravagant re-versions of Chinese tradition best typified by the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2003 movie hit *Hero*.

Zhang's outdoor tourism spectacles have established a new benchmark for success in the domestic tourism market; to date the tourism spectacle model has mostly involved historical re-enactments of classic tales in which cultural troupes authentically reproduce culture. Singers, dancers and acrobats perform, often on water, facilitated by pyrotechnic and special effects. In effect, these are smaller versions of the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony tailored to fit local legends.

In 2003, Zhang took up the challenge to produce an outdoor spectacular in Yangshuo in Guangxi Province, a place where he had filmed one of the major fights scenes in his blockbuster *Hero*. This themed outdoor event on the Li River was called *Impressions Liu Sanjie*. Based on a folk story about a beautiful third sister with a captivating voice, Liu Sanjie had previously been adapted into a successful movie. The story itself is not so relevant to the argument of the paper: aside from the basic ingredients of morality, beauty, struggle and romance the main attraction was the 'cultural reconversion'. The performative adaptation allowed the participation of Zhuang, Miao and Yao minority cultures while Zhang Yimou's involvement precipitated great anticipation of the project which was financed by the Guilin Guangwei Wenhua Tourism and Culture Co. Ltd.

According to reports, the number of local hotel beds increased from 479 before 2003 to 12,016 in 2005. Because it was staged at night time tourists inevitably stayed the night at local hotels. Local tourism revenue jumped from RMB 241 million of 2003 to over RMB 600 million in 2005, while the local land value increased five-fold. A local Zhang Yimou Arts School was established to support the training of performers for the show. This reduced the cost of the show. The show provided local employment: 400 fishermen from five local villages were employed as performers and were paid a monthly fee of RMB 600. Even the buffalo used in the show, or at least its owner, was paid RMB 300 per month for its appearances. However, not all the criticisms have been positive. One person wrote:

> Except China, no other countries in the world would provide artists the most precious resources of natural scenery resources as the stage of artistic creation or performances. Apart from the petrol pollution from the cruise boats, the smoke from the torches held by hundreds of performers is a polluter to the air. ... It is not worthwhile to make short-term profits at the expenses of long-term interests (Tie Zheng, *zhongguo huanjingbao,* 2008-04-17)

Entertainment performance in tourism locations is not a new strategy in China. Tourists are the bread and butter revenue for many cultural troupes throughout China. What is newer is the involvement of film directors. Flushed with success from *Impressions Liu Sanjie* Zhang continued the series with *Impression Lijiang* in 2006 and *Impression West Lake* a year later. *Impression West Lake* is staged in Hangzhou and emphasises Han folk stories, innovative and technical stage effects and the beauty of the urban landscape and the famous West Lake. The general narrative is not fundamentally so different from *Liu Sanjie*. What is more interesting, moreover, in the later instalments is the addition of pop stars and celebrities. In an interesting twist on the notion of formats, Jane Zhang, the runner up of a Chinese version of Idol called *Supergirls* (chaoji nvsheng), sings the theme song. The Japanese new age musician, Kitaro, also joins the team, adding an extra layer of attraction for the audience.

The location of the series in different tourism places within China illustrates the formatting of the *Impressions* model into local tourism development strategies. From 2006 to 2010, this *Impressions* format grew rapidly. In addition to the above named, there is now *Impression Hainan*, and *Impression Da Hongpao*. Using the format business models, the idea has become central to local tourism development plans with support from regional government and private investors.

The *Impression* series is now a formulaic approach: Chinese culture enhanced by technology, viral marketing and pop stars. These productions exploit the rising importance of Chinese culture in the global entertainment and tourism markets. They appeal to international consumers by incorporating essentialist images that not only link the product with stereotypical images of Chinese culture but simultaneously offer the appeal of the exotic locale. China's desire to build cultural capital, or soft power, using such an approach highlights the need to reconnect with the global tourism market in the post Beijing Olympics era. The *Impressions* series is a model for the franchising of contemporary artistic events in other parts of China, for instance there is now a similar attempt by film director Feng Xiaogang.

The use of the term 'impressions' is significant and as I will argue links to the idea of ongoing variation, so common in Chinese cultural history. The Oxford English Dictionary (2010) provides four definitions of 'impression'. Firstly, it is 'the image or feeling a person or thing gives to someone's mind, as regards its strength or quality'. Secondly, impression means 'a mark left by pressure.' This corresponds to an experience which leaves a memory such that a person might seek to buy a souvenir or memento. Thirdly, impression is interpreted as a model or a mould that can be replicated. Moreover, Zhang Yimou is an 'impresario', a person who arranges performances in theatres. The *Impression Series* reflect Zhang's cinematic and storytelling style. Zhang Yimou and his associated production team have built a reputation for quality outdoor spectacles. And that reputation has continued; it has attracted international collaboration in content, financial investments from the private sectors and favoured policies from regional governments.

Finally, impressionism is a style originating in France, from 1870 to 1900. Impressionism produces effects by light and colour rather than by details of form. Similar to the painting 'Impression, Sunrise' by Claude Monet, the *Impression series* evoke light and colour. Characteristics of Impressionist paintings include movement as a crucial element of human perception and experience and unusual visual angles. Impressionism in the storytelling is characterized by suggestion and atmosphere. The style of impressionism corresponds with Zhang Yimou's signature cinematic style of simplifying complex cultural resources, expressing visual sensations and repackaging these to a broader audience.

The *Impression* series has created mixed feelings in China. Some say it is a grand celebration of local culture; others feel that it is Zhang Yimou selling out. While there is much to analyse in the actual

content, the key issue in this paper is the formatted model of building success in the creative industries, one that has now generated a new awareness of the modularity of creativity.

Rarefied creativity

Moving away from the performance itself I want to address a problematic issue, the relationship between culture and creativity. This then moves into discussion of 'second level adaptive creativity'. I should point out that the following is an abbreviated version of a longer discussion (Keane 2011). My key point is that creativity in its purest form—for now, let's call it *type 1 creativity*— is the rarest of all activities.

Creativity, both Eastern and Western, is often a personal quest. When not driven by incentives, this type 1 mode of creativity is generative, renewing, so the minute something is formed it becomes part of the past. This perspective derives from Daoism. The point here is that the natural world is always incomplete. In the ancient Chinese perspective we are always 'becoming'. The world is like an uncarved block with a capacity for infinite characterization.

For an everyday example of this, think of young children who play without knowledge of the rules or without rewards systems attached to their play. Their play activity is genuinely creative; as children grow they receive praise and condemnation; they are asked to conform to a rule-bound system of society, which Bohm and Peat (2010) call 'the tacit infrastructure of culture'. They are asked to stop carving their block and accept the one that their culture has ordained. The focus shifts from becoming (experimenting, testing, challenging) to 'being' (fitting in, being moulded, being normal).

Similarly, experiments with chimpanzees have shown that when given canvas and paint they became totally absorbed and produced wall paintings that might pass for crude expressionism; moreover, they forgot about food and sex. Upon being given rewards for their works, the output began to degenerate and they produced the bare minimum required to please. This corresponds with research done on organisations by Teresa Amabile (1996) who has argued that incentives often have a negative effect on creativity.

Correlative worlds

The question of whether or not China does *type 1 creativity* as well as the West is probably less illuminating than the fact that, like arguments about Western versus Asian modernity, there are many varieties of creativity. It depends from where one starts. In Chinese philosophy, although there is a 'creation myth', the world does not have a beginning and a creator. Things interact continuously and change constantly. The 'ten thousand things' (wanwu) is a Daoist metaphor that refers to the endless self transforming nature of reality. From this perspective the Western 'objective world' doesn't really make sense; if the world is a constantly transforming set of events or processes, how can we have universal truths; if there are many orders, how can we prioritize one?

The 'ten thousand things' were regarded as a way of understanding variation according to existing natural patterns. Puett (2001) notes how the 'ambivalence of creation' in ancient China contrasted with the scientific model of innovation taken up by the West during the Enlightenment. In traditional China innovation was about the efficacious use of resources: in making the most of circumstances. Chinese artists and artisans did not privelige originality but rather believed that variations, mutations, and adapatations over time would eventually bring further change. They emphasised reproduction over creativity. As a text from the Song Dynasty tells us: 'The ten thousand things are produced and reproduced, so that variation and transformation have no end' (Zhou Dunyi in Ledderose 2000).

The idea of creativity hangs on the interplay of 'similar differences' and 'different similarities'. Things can be similar and they can be different (Bohm 1998). If they are identical or just mechanical copies then there is obviously no creativity. Perception identifies differences; it gathers differences and then sorts these into similarities and correlations. According to Hall and Ames (1995) the Chinese metaphysical world is based on correlative thinking, as opposed to the Western approach which is founded on causal thinking; for instance in the Chinese world there are correlations between heaven (*tian*) and humanity (*ren*), between change (*bian*) and continuity (*tong*), between stuff (*ti*) and function (*yong*). Hall and Ames note that according to this world view the well-known phrase 'as different as night and day' would be 'as different as night-becoming-day from day-becoming-night' (Hall and Ames 1998, 127).

The ten thousand things and the interplay between difference and similarity can be illustrated in a number of ways but perhaps the most instructive is the written language. The Chinese language has some 50,000 characters and these are composed by rearranging modules taken from a repertoire of

some two hundred parts. The language teaches how to build units through combination of elements. The visual mode also encourages pattern recognition, which itself is the basis of the Chinese system. In discussing Chinese architecture, the tomb of the terra cotta warriors, and Chinese bronzes among other things Ledderose comments: 'The Chinese, professing to take nature as their master, were never coy about producing through reproduction. They did not see the contrast between original and reproduction in such categorical terms as did westerners' (Ledderose 2000, 7).

Modularity allows a different perspective on creativity, one more associated with Lego and IKEA than Picasso and Proust. The interplay between similarity and difference is universal. It's what we do subconsciously when we acknowledge a powerful idea. The 'creative industries' is similar and different to the 'content', 'copyright' and 'cultural' industries. The interplay between similarity and difference is evident in respect to copyright law. International businesses are seemingly at a loss stop Chinese companies appropriating their images and their business models. In China IKEA competes with a Chinese franchise IJIA, somehow cleverer because JIA signifies 'home'. Coffee shops in China have taken the logo of Starbucks and reworked it, banking on the association of Starbucks and (Western) coffee drinkers. How very unoriginal, how derivative, one might say.

We choose to favour the terms 'novelty' and 'originality' over the more generic ideas of similarity and difference. However, one of the most well-known law suits in contemporary broadcasting history concerns the idea of 'substantial similarity', the standard developed and used by United States courts to determine whether a party has infringed copyrights. The case was litigation brought against Castaway Television Production Ltd, the US-based producer of the hit TV reality show, *Survivor* by Endemol Entertainment Ltd, the Dutch owner of the *Big Brother* format. In arguing that *Survivor* was creative work in its own right, the Castaway lawyers argued that there was limited substantial similarity; that is there was substantial difference over and above some similarity (Keane, Fung and Moran 2008).

Utilitarian creativity

Philosophical and legal debates remind us that the natural form of creativity is elusive. However, what policy makers, entrepreneurs and investors are more interested in is *utilitarian creativity*, which I believe is more akin to innovation. Amabile says that creativity is defined as the production

of novel and useful ideas by individuals or small teams of individuals working closely together. Innovation is the successful implementation of creative ideas by an organization (Amabile 1988). However, as I have mentioned in relation to some of the creative industries reports: if we hold too dearly to the idea of novelty and originality we condemn much of the creative economy data as nonsensical.

How can we then understand creativity in a way that accommodates policy and business while still engendering a sense of change, of variety, of value? The answer is what I call 'adaptive creativity', a term first used I believe by Sheridan Tatsuno in his book *Created in Japan: from Imitators to World Class Innovators*. Tatsuno wrote in relation to Japanese ingenuity:

> In the West, creativity is viewed as an epiphany and only one phase in the creative process—the generation of new ideas that triggers dramatic breakthroughs—is emphasized (Tatsuno 1999, 49).

He goes on:

> In the broadest sense, creativity reflects a fresh, novel and unorthodox way of thinking and viewing the world. We need to expand our Western notion of creativity to include all forms of creativity, including Japanese creativity (Tatsuno 1999, 49 - 50).

Tatsuno, writing at a time when Japan was breaking new ground in miniature consumer electronics formats, makes some interesting points in comparing East and West. He cites Roger Von Oech's graphic portrayal of the creative process, expressed as *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants* (a later version was *A Whack to the Side of the Head*). Von Oech suggests that people play four different roles in the creative process: explorer (searching for new information), artist (turning this into new ideas), judge (evaluating the merits), and warrior (acting on the idea). To these four, Tastuno adds the 'antique dealer': the practice of recycling old ideas for new applications. In China, the term 'putting new wine in old bottles' was used to describe how the Maoist revolutionaries rewrote Chinese cultural policy. Rather than trying to rewrite the source code, they used old cultural forms and updated these with Marxist content.

It is tempting to think of the Eastern idea of reincarnation here. Tatsuno writes about the Mandala of Creativity. The mandala was originally a Hindu concept but made its way into Pure land Buddhism to represent the idea of unending cycles and constant improvement. While nirvana is not exactly what

drives the corporate mind, the quest for improvement always figures in considerations. Recycling ideas and imitation is a business model that is shedding its negative image.

Oded Shenkar is the author of *Copycats: How Smart Companies Use Imitation to Gain a Strategic Edge. Shenkar's* interest in the role played by imitation in business strategy was aroused during thirty years of study on China. While imitation has always been widespread, it has gained a bad name due to the emphasis placed on innovation (and novelty). Due to the forces of globalization and the codification of knowledge, which facilitate reverse engineering, imitation 'is becoming more feasible for a wide array of products and services, process, and business models, as well as more attractive in costs, benefits and potential return (Shenkar 2005, 43).'

Another idea linked to imitation is adaptation. In most people's minds an adaptation refers to a work that has been remade in a new form; for instance, Baz Luhrmann's 1996 adaptation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet as *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. The 'treatment' here was to make a contemporary version to attract new audiences rather than be faithful to the original. Likewise Bernstein's *West Side Story* was an adaption of Romeo and Juliet, first as a stage musical 1959 and then as a film (1961). Familiar adaptations range from Broadway musical adaptations of Hollywood blockbusters (*The Lion King*, *West Side Story*), to filmic adaptations of successful stage plays to the screen in one language (*La cage aux folles* (1978 France) to an English version (*The Birdcage* 1996 US).

Since the movie industry began novels have been given the treatment, from Raymond Chandler's detective fiction to classical (and updated) versions of Charles Dickens and Jane Eyre. In addition to adaption we find sequels, prequels and allegories that bank on audience recognition of a previous work. Since the late 1990s the television industry has witnessed the emergence of a format industry through which program ideas are recycled and franchised across different cultural and linguistic territories. For instance, the quiz show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* has been remade in more than 150 countries (Keane, Fung and Moran 2008). Dedicated format producers refer to the 'pie and crust' to describe the process of filling a program model with local ingredients. Think of how many format spins-offs have come from the *Idol* format—*Britain's Got Talent*, *The X-Factor* etc—almost all of them developed by Simon Cowley.

Ironically the term 'original', which is often used as a synonym for creativity has a dual function. The original version undergoes transformation, often in a fresh and new way. The adaptation is both an imitation and a renewal, although the degree of originality is often not what counts. According to Linda

Hutcheon, the adaptation is first 'a formal entity or a product', one that has undergone a shift of medium or a change of frame (Hutcheon 2006, 7 – 8). Secondly, there is a 'process of creation' taking place. However, 'this act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation. Thirdly, from the perspective of reception, we experience adaptations as 'repetition with variation' through the memory of other works.

Cultural adaptation refers to the reorganization and rearrangement of popular culture, entertainment, consumption, creative design and the like on a large, even global scale, to fit the needs of particular situations, peoples, places and times. The key dynamic of this flow of cultural ideas from one place to another and from one time to another involves multifarious processes of identification, selection, adaptation, rearrangement and redeployment of cultural forms and styles, often in unexpected and highly productive circumstances (as well as in more conventional and predictable situations).

The Latin American communications scholar Néstor Garcia -Canclini (1991) uses the idea of 'cultural reconversion' to describe processes and strategies by which pre-existing works are transformed such that that their capacity to have social and economic benefits is extended. Traditional forms and styles of culture that have lost ground are renovated into contemporary expressions; oppositional or avant-garde art practices find sponsorship from corporations; traditional analogue forms are reconverted into commercial services through digital technology; and traditional art is revitalised by encountering the international art market.

Yet this is hardly 'new'. Recombination is the basis of creativity (Moran and Keane 2010). The original etymology of the word art, meaning 'to fit' or 'to arrange' in a particular order, illustrates the modern day conundrum of rapid adaptation. Writing about the emergence of the idea of creativity in ancient China, Michael Puett notes 'Much of what is interesting lies in the nuance, in the ways that specific individuals defined and redefined terms for specific purposes' (Puett 2001). Indeed, echoing the traditional Chinese view of an open-ended ever changing world, our modern reality is at all times discontinuous, a complex set of processes of transformation, *becoming* not being, never at rest. If we accept this understanding innovation and imitation are not contradictory but complementary.

To understand how processes of adaptation operate in the cultural and creative industries it is helpful to compare the film industry and television industries. Futures analyst David Loye (1999) has identified a series of processes by which creative works are materialised. A film may begin as an idea in the minds of someone, maybe even as a scrap of an idea, a character or a scene, perhaps

associated with some current fad. Due to the high probability of failure the idea is forced into a particular genre or form for the purposes of marketing; for instance romantic comedy, action adventure, thriller, road movie etc. In the case of an unformed idea, a writer or writing team is called in to expand the idea such that it fits the generic conventions of the market. The script is read by one of many experts who are hired to read the hundreds of scripts that appear; the decision to proceed will be weighed against information from the market, the availability of stars, previous successful films in the same genre or social trends.

This Predictor Factor Checklist is an industry gauntlet that includes the story itself, target demographics, costs, expected returns, press-sell, stars, distribution, markets, ratings (e.g. PG, M), release time, and the novelty factor. In addition to these factors, Loye draws attention to 'cycles in the dream factory'; for instance, periods when certain kinds of films are 'hot'. The first stage in this cycle is innovation whereby a new idea gets created, purchased or elaborated. This is followed by the production or 'implementation' stage. By the third stage certain 'imitation' tendencies emerge as a result of the commercial imperatives: this is the goal of making the product like something else in the market, often to the point of 'replication'. The end result is a spate of similar but different films that 'proliferate like mushrooms on the lawn'. Such a proclivity to replicate is found in all industry sectors from fashion to computers. However, rapid replication leads to 'saturation' and ultimately the progressive 'degradation' of the product, the final stage of which is 'boredom and satiation', the demise of novelty. In China we often see criticisms of the degraded nature of repetitive formats. Along with this is a lament that China can only imitate.

Modelling China's creative industries: three levels of activity

During its long history of contact with outside nations, China has excelled in taking in and adapting ideas. From the period of the Silk Road in the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) to the great openness of the Tang (AD 618–907) and Song Dynasties (AD 969–1279), China was a receiver of the best from the rest of the world. In the Yuan Dynasty, the Viennese traveller Marco Polo visited China and wrote exotic tales of the wonders of the East. Trade in ideas and artefacts increased gradually. By the Qing Dynasty (AD 1644–1911) a term had emerged to justify China's craving for Western knowledge: *xixue wei yong, zhongxue wei ti*, which meant that Western learning (technology) was good for its usefulness, but Chinese culture remained the core.

Foreign ideas flooded into China as the imperial order imploded. The modern printing press allowed wide dissemination. The practice of adapting foreign ideas was put on hold as China pursued its experiment with Soviet Marxism, which was itself adapted into Marxist-Leninist Mao Zedong Thought. During its period of isolation from the West, beginning in 1949 and lasting for three decades, China imported very few cultural ideas and formats, with the notable exception of Soviet socialist realism. Nor did it export its ideas to other nations, unless of course we count international propaganda services.

The 'creative industries' reached China in early 2004 (Keane 2007). By the end of the year, this new industrial development idea — or, more appropriately, this package of ideas — had taken a foothold in Shanghai policy circles. The new doctrine was led by scholar-consultants, many of whom spoke with British accents. International experts appeared, offering advice about creativity indexes, creative classes, milieus, clusters and networks. Conference organizers advertised for foreign speakers who could address the idea of creativity, often resulting in a mixed bag of confused generalizations from people who had no connection to the origins of the creative industries. Moreover, what was frequently lacking in the advice given was the specificity of Asian culture and politics. But advice was nevertheless received, absorbed and adapted into the socialist stew that would within two years become China's 'cultural creative industries'.

The Chinese cultural (and creative) innovation system came into the policy spotlight in the second half of the first decade. There is a rush to innovate and to be seen as creative. One of the key points to bear in mind is that relationships between politics, economics and culture in China are more complex and overlapping. While there is no space to discuss this in this paper it is clear that some innovations are a result of policy design or business strategy; others can be explained by an atypical market system that rewards shortcuts; others are the result of social networks and wiki-models of incubation. Specifically, I believe there are three levels of activity that illustrate how transformations are occurring. The first is in the realm of planning; the latter two concern market re-adjustment and co-creation.

This first level is primarily linked to official culture. At the national level the terms reform [*gaige*], construction [*jianshe*] and development [*fazhan*] signify a measured and highly regulated model of change. The process of *reforming*, *constructing* and *developing* pairs soft power and economic creativity; in doing so it generates (or tries to generate) film, TV, animation, games, and design that

are of high quality, which are aimed at new markets, and which attach intellectual property rights. Whereas reform is articulated by officials, the role of thinking is increasingly 'outsourced' or delegated to epistemic communities. Intense competition subsequently occurs among 'growth coalitions' (McGee at al 2006): these are local networks of developers, entrepreneurs, investors, artist-entrepreneurs, officials, intellectuals and residents who offer various development models to exploit interest in economic creativity.

Broadly speaking, the second level is the realm of commercial popular culture. Production (a notionally prior event) gives way to re-production (a subsequent event). On the level of the market we see opportunism and searching for production formats. In addition, we note a high degree of 'sifting' exists: that is the market searches international environments and online communities for ideas to commercialise: new versions of cultural classics and nostalgic remakes, and a predilection to adapt in literature, TV drama, online games, visual arts and animation. Reproductions appeal to new market segments; for example Yu Dan's (2006) adaptation of Confucius (*Confucius from the Heart*) mixes Buddhism and Western popular psychology. In particular Zhang's *Impressions* series is an adaptation that understands the necessity of connecting with regional governments.

The third level is fundamentally informal grassroots culture and is typified by creative activity in non-commercial spheres. Much of the reinvention currently occurring in online communities is not aimed directly at profiteering, but rather functions as informal and amateur incubation. In other words it is both re-creation and recreation. In addition, we see adaptations known collectively as *shanzhai*. Many of these find niches and efficacious uses in the market; these include communication appliances: mobile phones, fashions, food and beverages etc. that are often 'passed off' as being international luxury brands.

It is clear we are witnessing change processes substantially different from what occurred over the past century in Western democratic societies. To say that change is occurring faster because of technology, however, is to simplify complex processes.

Concluding remarks: type 2 creativity and structured uncertainty

In this paper I have suggested that there are many kinds of creativity and that the dominant Western emphasis on novelty and innovation needs to move aside and allow for a more utilitarian

understanding, which we might tentatively designate as type 2 or second level creativity. The definition that I propose is: The fitting of new ideas and alternative visions to existing norms, values and patterns: this 'fitting' encompasses invention, differentiation, adaptation, learning, and diffusion. In this the effect of creativity hangs on the interplay of 'similar differences' and 'different similarities'. This interplay is universal. However we tend to favour the terms 'novelty' and 'originality' over the more generic terms similarity and difference. In effect, we are all copycats, we adapt, we fit, we learn and we create value.

The issue of why this second level 'adaptive' creativity is widespread, particularly in China, is a more complex argument, which I address in detail elsewhere (Keane 2011). However, in concluding I want to suggest some contemporary rationales for the emphasis on adaptation rather than original content production in China. In an important study of the IT industry in Beijing, Dan Breznitz and Michael Murphee (2011) have described a background of 'structured uncertainty'. In short, this idea refers to unpredictability and ambiguity. Breznitz and Murphee note four institutional features that produce unstructured uncertainty in China: first, there is a call to reform economy and society, which leads to testing and extension of various models; many of these models are found at a distance from Beijing and draw on local initiatives; second, there is a complicated bureaucratic system that complicates efficient decision making; third, decisions are often made by powerful individuals; and fourth, there is a built-in vagueness about the nature of economic reform.

In the creative industries in China we find a high degree of such structured uncertainty. First, there is ongoing ambiguity about what the term creative industries entails and how it should be linked to reform. In Beijing the emphasis is on cultural; elsewhere it is on creative. Too much creativity might be too destructive; not enough runs the risk of falling behind. The propensity to test models is evident in the number of clustering experiments we see in all major cities. The issue of powerful connections manifests in the 'green lighting' of projects. Added to this is the inherent riskiness of the media and cultural industries, the lack of effective market mechanisms that rewards people for original work, and the dangers of expressing ideas that go against the mainstream. Some of these issues are not new. In the past producers and artists have made similar content because the buyer for the content, the state dictated the form. Now the market is the arbiter and some old habits die hard.

The effect of uncertainty is the tendency to avoid risks, to copy models that are already successful, and to produce many similar versions. In the process there are incremental processes of creativity,

of ingenuity and inspiration. The downside of this tendency is that the market sooner or later rejects versions that are too similar. The example of the *Impressions* series is one of many instances of a successful business model that is cleverly exploiting the interest in creativity and traditional culture.

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