

# Culture for the Masses: Building Grassroots Cultural Infrastructure in China

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the development of “grassroots cultural infrastructure”—namely, “cultural halls” and “cultural stations”—at the county level and below since the Mao Zedong era. Since their formation, the party-state has accorded cultural halls and stations a critical role in propagating policies, educating citizens, and conducting cultural activities. Based on historical gazetteers, Chinese Communist Party histories, government policies, handbooks, and statistical yearbooks, this article shows that frequently changing policy priorities meant cultural halls and stations were wedged in between the demands of the party-state and the people and were ill-equipped to fulfill their role. Mass political campaigns during the Mao era wrought havoc, and commercialization during reform and opening up undermined their relevance. In the mid-2000s, a focus on service provision resulted in higher expectations that were impossible to fulfill. As a remedy, after 2015, cultural infrastructure has been reorganized and increasingly deployed via volunteers and technology. This article therefore sheds light not only on the history of grassroots cultural infrastructure but also its future.

## Keywords

cultural infrastructure, cultural provision, propaganda, grassroots governance

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In the early 1950s, Yinchuan 银川 in Ningxia province held a series of exhibitions on the Three-Antis and Five-Antis campaigns that aimed at uprooting corruption and unmasking enemies of the state. While visiting them, some people became so agitated that they reported suspected criminals to police on the spot (Yinchuan Municipality Mass Art Gallery Gazetteer, 1993: 33). In 1990, in Nanjing's Jianye 建邺 district a gang rape occurred in a cultural hall. Police solved the case within forty-three hours and arrested a local factory worker and a twenty-six-year-old man (Jianye Office of the Nanjing Public Security Bureau, 2006: 548). Fast forward twenty-nine years: a local resident explains that their community is "without property management. However, now we have a volunteer service team for security. . . . In addition to deterring criminals, there are many elderly people living here. If anyone has an emergency, volunteers can provide help" ("Bengbu, Anhui," 2019). Such volunteer services are provided through cultural stations (integrated under "new era civilization practice centers," see below) in collaboration with other institutions.

On the surface, these three examples could not be more unrelated: a reminder of the Mao era's top-down mobilizational style of campaign governance, a heinous crime rooted in institutional dysfunction and societal breakdown, and an example of either bottom-up participatory governance or mass surveillance. However, what ties them together is that they all involve local cultural institutions and exemplify their functions and problems in different periods. As such, the three vignettes are not only windows into different eras and their political and socioeconomic challenges, but also reflect varying ideas of the role of cultural institutions and how they have related to ordinary people from the Mao Zedong era onwards.

This article examines this evolution. As such, it shares its analytical focus with other scholars who have examined cultural institutions in the People's Republic of China (PRC), particularly with regard to the related topics of museums and "exhibitionary culture" (Ho, 2018: 5). In the postrevolutionary era, museums and exhibitions were places where ordinary people were molded into citizens of the newly formed PRC. Chang-Tai Hung, for instance, examines the formation of a "museum of the Chinese revolution" in the early years of the PRC (Hung, 2005), while, as the introductory anecdote in this article from Yinchuan shows, and Denise Ho (2018: 5) also attests, political exhibitions showed people "how to take part in revolution." Even in the post-Mao era, the primary function of such institutions in constructing citizens has not abated. For instance, Kirk A. Denton shows how in postsocialist China museums are tied to narratives of history that legitimize market reform (Denton, 2014).

However, despite their importance, in 1949 the PRC boasted a mere twenty-one museums (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1983: 532). In

contrast, the vast grassroots cultural infrastructure consisting of thousands of “cultural halls” 文化馆 and “cultural stations” 文化站 serving ordinary people at the county/municipality and street/township levels has been neglected. One exception is Brian DeMare’s (2015: 183, 213–16) examination of drama troupes during the Mao era and their intersection with local cultural infrastructure in Hubei and Shanxi provinces. Similarly, Elizabeth Perry (2012) assesses the use of cultural resources in the mining town of Anyuan 安源. While they show how grassroots cultural institutions became spaces of contestation, these works focus on the Mao era and are either primarily concerned with other actors or are geographically limited. Focusing on the grassroots cultural infrastructure that people encounter every day, the article extends the existing literature from the Mao era to the 2020s.

I argue that the development of grassroots cultural infrastructure is a story of grandiose aspirations and deficient implementation against the backdrop of turbulent political and socioeconomic changes. Despite attention from the party center and continuous investment, the party-state consistently failed to clarify its mission and resolve problems of funding, staffing, and integration of local cultural institutions. The reasons for this differed over time, and this article’s structure corresponds to four periods in the development of grassroots cultural institutions in the PRC: the Mao era, the reform and opening up period, 2005 to 2015, and 2015 onwards.

During the Mao era, grassroots cultural institutions were seen as critical to constructing socialist culture among citizens.<sup>1</sup> As this article shows, however, people often paid little attention to the party-state’s ambitions for remolding society through propaganda and education; more important were mismatches between grassroots cultural institutions’ widening duties and available resources and the pressures of continuous campaigns that gradually discredited them until they were utterly paralyzed during the Cultural Revolution. The reform and opening up period attached new importance to grassroots cultural institutions as a counterweight to capitalist thought. During this period, they were embedded in a legal framework, their responsibilities regularized, and their budgets increased. Yet contradictory policies and funding pressures meant that while they were promoting socialist values, they also became increasingly commercialized and driven by people’s diverse needs. Notwithstanding the party-state’s massive investment in and attention to grassroots cultural institutions as a counterweight to perceived moral and spiritual degeneration, these attempts were altogether half-hearted.<sup>2</sup> Coupled with the expanding tasks of grassroots cultural institutions, commercialization ultimately was only one of several factors that led to the continued erosion of cultural infrastructure, which had reached critical levels by the early 2000s.

Only after 2005 did the leadership try to bring cultural infrastructure under control. Available resources were increased dramatically, and cultural institutions' functions were increasingly embedded in a political, legal, and institutional framework intended to redirect them to serving new social groups. However, ambitions continued to outstrip capacity, and they were overstretched and ultimately unable to fulfill their newfound duties. The latest stage of reform, which began in 2015, is still ongoing. Previous initiatives have been sidelined, and the longstanding Mao-era arrangement in which cultural infrastructure was led by the state has been upended in favor of direct party control. With a new mission to propagate Xi Jinping's ruling ideology, grassroots cultural institutions have started drafting volunteers and using online platforms to create synergies among one another for better service delivery. Ideas of culture have broadened and everyday services—like deterring criminals as in the introductory anecdote—have been put under an ideological banner. Building on and extending the existing literature, the article shows that the party-state has been consistently outpaced by the changing socioeconomic environment. However, despite being reactive, it has never jettisoned its grand ambition of leveraging cultural institutions as a tool to transform society.

Tracing the development of cultural halls and stations as a proxy for grassroots cultural infrastructure offers an important lens on how the party-state understands, builds, and maintains culture at the local level. On a broader level, it shows the party-state's ambitions to extend itself into the fabric of people's everyday lives and the challenges it has encountered in achieving this vision. This article is based on a variety of sources. These include policy documents by party and state organs, leaders' speeches, research reports, summaries of meetings, handbooks, national and local laws and regulations, and newspaper articles. For quantitative data, I rely on several sources, among them statistical yearbooks and local government gazetteers. Finally, to complement these upper-echelon sources I use local party histories and cultural, police, and judicial gazetteers that often provide reports of activities, incidents, and court cases involving cultural institutions.

## **The Mao Era: Transformation and Dysfunction**

Cultural halls and stations have been around since the founding of the PRC. During the early years of the PRC, many localities turned ancestral halls and temples into cultural halls or renamed existing “public education halls” 民众教育馆. By the end of 1949, the PRC already had 896 cultural halls at the county/municipal level (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1983: 532). One level down at the street/township level, China boasted 4,525 cultural

stations in 1953 (“Wang Huanan’s report,” 2002 [1953]). While formally under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, as Alan Liu (1971: 36) shows, the Central Propaganda Department had significant influence over them; a model that, as Richard Kraus (2004: 42) notes, persists even today. Throughout the Mao era, they were part of a broader propaganda and cultural system that included radio stations, loudspeakers, libraries, museums, theaters, and film projection and theater troupes, among others. Alongside the party’s propaganda, education, and public security bureaus, cultural halls and stations had a fixed place in transforming society at the grassroots. Their tasks were delineated early on as “literacy education, current affairs and policy propaganda, culture and entertainment, and scientific knowledge popularization” (Office of the Ministry of Culture, 1982: 11). Their aims were to “satisfy the local people, especially the culture of the workers and peasants, through various mass cultural activities,” so that they could “become conscious and active defenders and builders of the motherland.” To do this, cultural halls and stations were to hold lectures, discussions, and exhibitions, show slideshows and films, and broadcast radio programs. Furthermore, they organized performances, evening get-togethers, reading groups, indoor and outdoor entertainment activities, and study courses, as well as conducting literacy work (Office of the Ministry of Culture, 1982: 262). These tasks were not exhaustive: cultural halls in Heilongjiang province ran 59 evening classes to promote literacy, 102 evening classes for workers, and 202 public schools 民众学校 (Heilongjiang Provincial Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 1996: 719).

Mass cultural infrastructure grew quickly, leading to significant problems and excesses. From 1949 until 1952, the number of cultural halls increased by 250 percent. Indeed, with the number of cultural halls reaching 2,430, China’s then 2,319 counties and municipalities were already saturated (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1983: 532). Thereafter the number of cultural halls, while fluctuating, stagnated (standing at 2,936 in 2019) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022: table 23-19). Despite rapid growth, cultural infrastructure in the early years of the PRC was woefully inadequate and criticism far from uncommon. At the end of 1953, the Ministry of Culture lamented that cultural halls and stations were being established too quickly, leading to unclear tasks. Rather than being bottom-up collaborative institutions that worked with other social forces, including unions, the Communist Youth League, and the All-China Women’s Federation, to conduct activities, cultural halls and stations reportedly suffered from “bureaucratism and commandism,” “extravagance and wastefulness,” and “formalism.” The reason for that was “lack of clear leadership by the cultural administrative authorities 文化行政主管部门,” which employed “incompetent people” (Office of the Ministry of Culture, 1982: 261–65). Responding

to these inadequacies, the Ministry of Culture called for activities to be enriched, equipment increased, and leadership strengthened. Lack of focus, inability to satisfy people's cultural needs, staffing and funding shortages, and lack of local integration would remain problems even into the twenty-first century.

This scathing review of their efforts, however, did not hinder their development. The First Five-Year Plan from 1953 designated them as important to "increasing people's socialist consciousness and production" in order to "develop socialist culture" ("First Five-Year Plan," 2011 [1953]), and their activities were closely linked to social transformation and synchronized with political campaigns (DeMare, 2015: 16–17, 146). In Yunnan, the local cultural authorities walked a fine line, aiming at eradicating the "superstitious" cultural activities of the local Yi ethnic group while allowing locals to get together on these dates to "sing and dance" and "exchange gifts" (Cultural Hall of Guandu District, n.d.: 87–88). The compromise shows the party-state's intent to transform customs while catering to local culture. People were also transformed through education and propaganda. To eradicate "feudalism," some authorities deployed storytelling. One county in Henan organized performances of *The Stone and the Fairy* 石头与仙女 and *The Book Peddler and the Three Aunts* 卖书郎和三姑 that were critical of the feudal marriage system (Sanmenxia Municipal Cultural Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 2007: 221). In Guangdong, peasant amateur theater troupes and literary and artistic, newspaper reading, communication, and creative groups were organized (Guangdong in Contemporary China, 1991: 56–57). The National Agricultural Development Plan 全国农业发展纲要 for 1956–1967 aimed to develop a rural "cultural network" 文化网 integrating "film troupes," "clubs," "cultural stations," and "library rooms," which further drove expectations.

Tasks broadened. Cultural halls and stations were to "hold exhibitions, give reports, provide books" and organize "teams to tour the countryside to conduct propaganda and . . . organize and guide peasants' amateur artistic activities" (Office of the Ministry of Culture, 1982: 260). They were to carry out recreational activities in factories, on construction sites, and in streets while paying particular attention to small factories, handicraft workers, shop assistants, housewives, and children. However, even more broadly, cultural halls and stations were to link with unions to strengthen guidance over peasants' free time through film screenings, musical performances, or theater troupes. Many cultural halls held exhibitions. For example, the cultural hall in Nanyuan 南苑 village in Beijing's Fengtai 丰台 district held an exhibition on contraception in April 1957 that included pictures, medical instruments, medicines, and books. Reportedly, locals were not enthusiastic about it and

the exhibition was only visited by 5,627 people, only slightly more than the number of party members in the district, which stood at 3,699 in 1957, and a small fraction of the district's population of 431,352 at the end of 1958 (Fengtai District Committee Party History Data Collection Office, 1992: 117). Indeed, as DeMare notes, cultural workers consistently "struggled with audience preference" (DeMare, 2015: 143). Grassroots penetration and the attractiveness of activities were low, and the broadening of activities led to a lack of focus.

Involvement in campaigns and lack of infrastructure were major problems. During the Anti-Rightist Campaign, a circular alleged that cultural halls had "changed [political] direction" and cultural workers did not go to the countryside or into factories ("The literary and artistic circles of Zhejiang," 2002 [1957]). This insinuated that cultural work was divorced from the masses. The accusation was not unfounded. Peasants in Sichuan's Xichong 西充 county complained that the organizers of literary and artistic events, mostly young people, "rarely participated in productive labor," which led to conflicts (Xichong County Culture and Sports Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 2013: 74). In one case in Tianjin, a cadre at a cultural hall was even expelled from the party because, after laboring for five days in the countryside, he fled back to the city and pretended to be ill (Tianjin Gazetteers Editorial Committee Office, 2008: 235). Because of these transgressions, some officials even advocated abolishing cultural halls and stations altogether. While this did not happen, the criticism stymied their development. However, a deeper issue was the lack of basic infrastructure, which translated into an inability to effectively penetrate the countryside and conduct activities. In 1955, China only had around 3,900 cultural stations, or one for every 159,000 people. Staffing was also lacking, with Beijing's 228 local cultural hall and station workers serving a total population of 3.8 million in 1956 (Beijing in Contemporary China, 1989: 227, 764).

The beginning of the Great Leap Forward and the widespread adoption of the commune system saw a massive expansion of cultural infrastructure. As culture became the responsibility of the communes, they all needed to "have a cultural hall" ("Report on the principles and tasks of future cultural and artistic work," 2002 [1960]). Hubei province, for example, set the target of one cultural station for every 50,000 people ("Comprehensive plan for the development of agriculture," 2002 [1957]). However, that salaries and expenses were financed by the communes themselves led in some cases to "dissatisfaction amongst the masses" toward the perceived waste of scarce resources (Li County Cultural Bureau, 1990: 40). The fear of disturbance was so high that a police station in Hebei distributed a gun with four bullets to the director of the local cultural hall (Xingtai Public Security Bureau, 1990: 194).



The mismatch between expectations and reality was palpable: massive growth did not strengthen institutions but led to their collapse. Sichuan's 129 cultural stations and 159 full-time staff members in 1958 declined to a mere four stations and four staff members by 1960 (Editorial Committee of the Sichuan Mass Culture Gazetteer, 1998: 88).<sup>3</sup> Even worse, Beijing's local halls and stations did not conduct any cultural activities from 1958 until 1963. While tasks reflected a more mass-based approach, shifting toward "collecting, sorting through, and publishing folk literature" and conducting events with broad appeal, this was only half the story: demand was meager. In 1961, Shanxi province's cultural halls held an impressive 31,501 performances; however, they were attended by only 57 people each on average (Office of the Shanxi Culture and Arts Gazetteer Editorial Committee, 1990: 232). The total audience of 1,798,640 people only amounted to roughly 10.5 percent of Shanxi's overall population in 1961. While expanding cultural infrastructure, the Great Leap Forward was utterly unsuccessful in broadening its appeal, exacerbated by the party-state's general ignorance about grassroots cultural work (DeMare, 2015: 174).

During the Cultural Revolution, the position of grassroots cultural infrastructure was precarious. Official calls to "destroy the four olds and establish the four news" led to fervent attacks. Cultural halls and stations were denounced as "black dens" and "black models," and their staff were labeled "reactionary academic authorities." In one county in Guizhou, four of five staff members of the local cultural hall were arrested and struggled against (Party History Research Office of the Party Committee of Songtao Miao Autonomous County, 1999: 145). Despite orders to protect cultural items, in other areas books were burned. In Hubei's Jingzhou, over half of the books held by cultural halls were destroyed, a total of 400,000 volumes (Jingzhou Municipal Historical Records Office, 2011: 123). Attacks only ceased in May 1967, when the party center forbade attacks on cultural organizations. However, many cultural institutions were effectively paralyzed. Where they continued to function, they served the purposes of the Cultural Revolution. One county in Henan transformed its cultural hall into a "Mao Zedong Thought propaganda station" and while its space decreased from 400 to 300 square meters, its permanent staff exploded from seven to twenty-nine (Shan County Cultural Gazetteer Editorial Office, 1985: 94). Cultural services on offer differed. One Kunming cultural hall reported that they only "chanted [Mao] quotes" and performed "loyalty dances" and "model operas" (Cultural Hall of Guandu District, n.d.: 230). Sometimes local leaders would open themselves to ridicule. In Guizhou, cadres wanted to propagate the "innovation" of a "revolutionary Peking opera." However, since no one was trained to perform it, performers lacked rhythm, and peasants mocked them. While



local leaders pushed forward, content became increasingly localized, leading to substantial confusion among locals, who said that feudal plays were both being “criticized” and “resurfacing” at the same time (Shiqian County Cultural Bureau, 1995: 336). This showcases how bridging local culture and centrally sanctioned ideology was a major problem throughout the Mao era (DeMare, 2015: 164–65). Other cultural halls chose different methods. In Henan, a cultural hall became immensely popular when it acquired a fourteen-inch black-and-white television. Audience members arrived for showings up to one hour before the start of the program bringing their own stools, and by the time the programs began the courtyard “was crowded, with people standing alongside the walls” (Nanpi County Culture and Sport Bureau, 2009: 403). Audiences clearly voted with their feet.

Overall, for grassroots cultural infrastructure, the Mao period was a double-edged sword. While the party oversaw an unprecedented expansion of the cultural sector and penetration of the grassroots, cultural institutions suffered during the era’s numerous political campaigns. This was to some extent by design: after all, cultural halls and stations were designed to propagate policy and instill socialist consciousness, even if this led to their destruction. However, by the end of the Cultural Revolution, the 1953 criticism of the Ministry of Culture still rang true: little integration with other organizations, an acute lack of funding and staff, and constantly changing policy priorities meant that they remained in a state of dysfunction.

## **Reform and Opening Up: Between Commercialization and Socialist Values**

At a county-level conference in 1978, a rehabilitated author cried out: “Now that the ‘Gang of Four’ has been overthrown, the spring of literature and art has arrived. . . . The party has given me a second life, and I want to actively pick up my pen and contribute to the ‘Four Modernizations’” (Jieyang County Cultural Gazetteer Editorial Team, 2003: 501). Grassroots cultural infrastructure could not provide support for this. A ministerial report stated that over six hundred counties had no cultural hall and the existing ones often lacked space, funds, and personnel, and could not hold activities (“Some issues and problems regarding current cultural and artistic work,” 1981). Apart from broad dysfunction, the state’s retreat in the early reform and opening-up period presented a new problem. While ostensibly freed from the demands of complying with national campaigns and stringent economic planning, as Kraus (2004: 192) notes, market reforms meant that the “network of cultural centers was forced to find ways to support itself.” In the best-case scenario,

cultural halls would start charging for some events and reinvest their profits into equipment such as television sets, recording kits, or expanding physical infrastructure. In the worst-case scenario, however, poorer localities were forced to close their cultural halls or could only support them in a “minimal way” (Kraus, 2004: 192). Similarly, the erosive potential of liberal values alarmed the authorities. A 1981 report stated that, encouraged by the new policy direction, “some people” demanded “absolute freedom” and advocated for “extreme individualism” (“Some issues and problems regarding current cultural and artistic work,” 1981). The leadership therefore sought a recalibration of mass cultural work.

Cultural infrastructure was to be expanded and socialist values promoted to balance the influx of liberal and market values. Deng Xiaoping set forth the new policy direction, endorsing Marshal Ye Jianying’s concept of “spiritual civilization” and arguing that cultural work needed to criticize “anarchism and extreme individualism” and “carry forward the revolutionary traditions of our party and people” (Deng, 2008 [1979]). Subsequently, new regulations drafted by the Ministry of Culture defined the nature and focus of cultural halls until 1992 (Ministry of Culture, 1981). Accordingly, cultural halls had four tasks: conducting cultural activities to foster patriotism and ideological and moral education; promoting Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought and propagating the party line; popularizing science, technology, cultural, and health knowledge; and mobilizing the masses for entertainment activities and collect folk artistic heritage. These aims could be achieved through lectures, exhibitions, study classes, artwork displays 橱窗, galleries, posters, art evenings, or entertainment evenings (Ministry of Culture, 1981: Article 7). Cultural halls were also obliged to coordinate with other mass organizations, including the Communist Youth League, unions, and the All-China Women’s Federation, and rely on activists, art workers, scientific and technical personnel, and teachers. Subsequently, cultural halls were added to the 1982 state constitution, the Sixth Five-Year Plan promised their expansion, and then General Secretary Zhao Ziyang highlighted their importance. While this was hailed as a change from “small culture” to “big culture,” in effect cultural halls and stations were asked to resort back to their original tasks of the early 1950s: education, propaganda, entertainment, and science popularization, albeit with increased involvement from society to alleviate concerns about insufficient staffing.

In the years thereafter many localities consolidated their cultural infrastructure, and government expenditure on culture more than doubled from 444 million yuan in 1978 to 932 million yuan by 1985. During this time, many cultural institutions in communes were reclassified and put under the auspices of townships. According to the Ministry of Culture, in 1982, China had 32,780

cultural stations nationwide, a tenfold increase from 3,264 stations in 1978 (“Request of the Ministry of Culture,” 1984). This was due to the inclusion of citizen-run and for-profit stations. In 1980, Sichuan province had only twenty-two state-run cultural stations with twenty-two permanent employees. This number was dwarfed by citizen-run stations, which numbered 756 with 3,343 full-time staff members (Editorial Committee of the Sichuan Mass Culture Gazetteer, 1998: 91). In some cases, the combination of expansion and commercialization led to lax security measures. At a Chinese New Year event in Sichuan, a cultural hall set off fireworks. In the ensuing panic, 58 people were trampled to death and 43 injured (Sichuan Province Local Gazetteers Compilation Committee, 1996: 84). In other cases, investments caused clashes with residents. In Ningxia province, a local cultural hall built a movie theater on the land of a mosque demolished during the Cultural Revolution. After protests and government intervention, the cultural hall moved its cinema elsewhere, with the mosque being rebuilt at its original site (Ningxia Judicial Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 1998: 307).

Despite increasing policy attention and funding, a 1984 stock-taking assessment was mixed. On the positive side, the expansion over the previous years meant that cultural stations could “play an active role in meeting the urgent requirements of the masses’ cultural life, publicizing the party’s policies, cooperating with ideological and political work, popularizing scientific and technological knowledge, and promoting production.” Furthermore, they had been successful at “attracting a large number of young people, enriching their cultural life, meeting their requirements for learning science and culture, and promoting the transformation of less advanced and misguided young people.” The shortcomings cited were not new, however. The assessment pointed to a lack of mission, staff, and funds (“Request of the Ministry of Culture,” 1984). While this was a throwback to the 1950s, the needs were real: the exorbitant growth in the early 1980s led to waste, with many local cultural stations becoming unsustainable.

The Ministry of Culture proposed a set of remedies. In terms of mission, cultural stations were to “organize and hold mass cultural, artistic, cultural, and sports activities; conduct propaganda and education with communism at its core; popularize scientific, technological, and cultural knowledge; invigorate the cultural life of the masses; guide the cultural activities of the rural masses; and assist the administrative authorities in managing rural mass cultural undertakings, folk artists, and cultural entrepreneurs 文化个体户” (“Request of the Ministry of Culture,” 1984). To resolve staffing shortages, each station was required to employ one full-time staff member and could hire additional workers. Many of these were amateur writers, painters, or musicians. As for funding, localities were encouraged to gradually increase

subsidies. However, the document also opened the door for money-making: hence, cultural stations were allowed to “sell books, newspapers, and periodicals” or “carry out other activities” to increase revenue. Illustrative is the situation in Nanjing’s Baixia 白下 district, where the local cultural hall massively expanded its literature and art training courses. In 1977, it provided three free courses, on folk art, drama, and storytelling, with two sessions scheduled for each course. By 1981, the cultural hall had started charging fees for its courses, but now offered ten different courses (adding dance, photography, and painting, among others) with twenty sessions each. The expansion proved popular, with students increasing from 40 to 852 (Cultural Bureau of Baixia District, 1991: 77). Central policies therefore trailed the localities, where the commercialization of culture had already been going on for a number of years. Nevertheless, such policies further opened the floodgates for marketization.

While advances were rapid, the gap between grassroots cultural infrastructure at the sub-county and county levels grew. At the sub-county level, China had 47,577 cultural stations with 65,981 employees in 1985. In total, expenditures of cultural stations only amounted to 13 million yuan, or 273 yuan per cultural station and 197 yuan per employee. This was a mere 8 percent of total expenditure on mass cultural undertakings. In comparison, at the county level, expenditures of cultural halls reached 43,000 yuan per hall and 3,375 per full-time staff member in 1985, representing a staggering 65 percent of total expenditure (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1986: 779, 783). However, while the county level was comparatively better funded, investments were often made to lure in larger audiences. After a cultural hall in Jiangxi province acquired two color television sets in 1984, it received an audience of around one thousand to its four to six daily television screening events, with an annual audience equivalent to 60 percent of the county’s total population. Compared to other recreational activities, such as painting, which only attracted 123,637 visitors, equivalent to 21 percent of the local population, these events were extremely popular (Jinxian County Cultural Hall, 1994: 12). Notwithstanding increasing mass appeal, Fujian province reported that for 1985 its cultural halls’ income from business operations was “only 460,000 yuan,” amounting to a mere 13.5 percent of what it received through the state budget (Fujian Provincial Local Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 2002: 287). As Shuyu Kong (2005: 13) notes, financial pressures “in some cases threatened [the] . . . very survival” of the cultural infrastructure, which broadly led to “a reduction in the level of collective cultural services” (Fitzgerald, 1984: 107).

By the mid- to late 1980s, the state had become increasingly irrelevant. In the most extreme cases, cultural stations were turned over to private entrepreneurs, who turned them into garbage dumping grounds (Sun, 1989). More often, however, private cultural infrastructure offered “new worlds of

entertainment” to “starved” audiences (Kong, 2005: 15). In Nanjing, the number of pool tables increased from only a few hundred to over 2,300 in 1988. They were so heavily frequented that residents complained about excessive noise during the night, leading authorities to mandate that they should not “affect citizens’ rest” (Nanjing Mass Culture Institute, 1994: 89). Another district in Nanjing installed 92 electronic arcade-style gaming machines in 1988 that proved to be extremely popular. By 1990 their number had risen to 169 (Cultural Bureau of Baixia District, 1991: 90).

At the same time, the party tried to steer clear of what it saw as “spiritual pollution.” The 1986 “Resolution of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on the Guiding Principles for the Construction of Socialist Spiritual Civilization” aimed at strengthening the socialist aspects of cultural infrastructure. A campaign against “spiritual pollution” ensued and authorities in Nanjing destroyed 4 million copies of illegal newspapers and periodicals promoting “pornography, murder, and obscenities” (Nanjing Mass Culture Institute, 1994: 87). However, instead of dealing with contradictory pressures faced by cultural institutions, the party-state threw money at them. From 1985 to 1989, cultural expenses increased by 45 percent and expenditure on mass cultural undertakings by 92 percent. The steepest increases, however, were found at the grassroots. From 1985 to 1989, cultural station expenditures rose 131 percent, vis-à-vis 86 percent for cultural halls. Again, higher funding did not translate into greater capacity. Both the total number of cultural stations and their permanent staff members decreased to the lowest levels since 1985. Signaling the retreat of the state, in 1989 Sichuan province had 7,117 privately run stations with 17,859 staff compared to a mere thirteen state-run stations with thirty employees (Editorial Committee of the Sichuan Mass Culture Gazetteer, 1998: 91).

The nationwide protests that came to a head in Tiananmen Square in 1989 embodied the state’s loss of control over cultural infrastructure. Many localities enacted measures to fight back against commercialization. One district in Kunming published local regulations fining cultural hall operators who held music and dance parties and hosted “smoking and dancing” teenagers under the age of sixteen wearing “tank tops or slippers” (Cultural Bureau of Guandu District, 1996: 238). More broadly, participation in events also fell significantly. While in 1988 roughly 470,000 people attended activities organized by one local cultural hall in Jiangxi (equivalent to 77 percent of the local population), this number fell to 270,000 in 1989 (or 44 percent) (Jinxian County Cultural Hall, 1994: 34–36). However, although localities could not resist the party center’s rectification order, overall implementation was superficial. Local leaders did not want to kill the golden goose: while the number of pool tables in Nanjing declined by over two thousand, private cultural

services continued to generate over 40 million yuan in revenues, drawing fifty thousand people daily, equivalent to roughly 1 percent of its population (Nanjing Mass Culture Institute, 1994: 83, 98). People voted against traditional propaganda by state-run cultural halls and stations with their feet and wallets.

The 1992 "Cultural Station Management Methods" 文化站管理办法 issued by the Ministry of Culture reflected the tension between commercialization and entertainment and socialist values (Ministry of Culture, 1992). They defined cultural stations as the "state's most basic cultural institution" and as places for "cultural and entertainment activities." For the first time, their tasks were clearly defined. First, they were to use cultural methods to carry out propaganda and education. Second, cultural stations were to organize recreational and sports activities, and film screenings. Third, they were to conduct cultural workshops. Fourth, stations should also popularize scientific and cultural knowledge and spur local economic development. Fifth, they should develop a repository of local folk heritage, protect cultural relics, and guide cultural rooms and clubs at the village level. Finally, stations were also to manage the local cultural market. The scale of cultural stations was standardized as well. Hence, they should have a multifunction activity room, a book and newspaper reading room, a recreation room, a seminar room for coaching and training, a movie theater, an athletics ground, a basketball court, and undefined "other spaces." Finally, to deal with the chronic lack of staffing and funding, cultural stations could employ contract workers. Furthermore, funding was to come from the government, but also "units and individuals" who should provide funding "on a voluntary basis." Business operations for state-run cultural infrastructure were encouraged.

The rules had little impact and cultural infrastructure entered a state of serious decline. In several cases, the situation was so grim that cultural halls became crime hotspots. In one station a VCR, a color television, video tapes, and 8,000 yuan in cash were stolen (Yixing Public Security Gazetteer, 1993: 252). Sometimes even directors of cultural halls resorted to stealing cultural relics to sell on the market (Zhongtiaoshan Nonferrous Metals Company Public Security Department, 1998: 177). In other cases, they became gambling dens frequented by local leaders (Lezhi County Discipline Inspection Committee, 2009: 188). At the grassroots, cultural provision was barely existent, with cultural stations having, on average, 1.57 full-time employees each in 1993. Increases in cultural expenses and expenditure were made from a low level. While during the 1980s and early 1990s advances were made to ameliorate the financial situation of mass cultural institutions, by and large they failed. From 1985 to 1993, even though expenditures increased by 474 percent from 13 million to 74.6 million, the number of cultural stations decreased by 13 percent and the number of employees shrank by 3 percent

(National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1986: 783, and 1994: 623). Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, cultural halls and stations were in a weak position when it came to fulfilling their tasks. Problems cited in the mid-1990s essentially remained the same as in the 1950s: funding, staffing, a lack of attractive activities, and local integration.

The year 1996 was a turning point for cultural infrastructure. New regulations on funding cultural institutions were consequential. Commercial venues were obliged to pay a “cultural undertaking tax” of 3 percent of their operating income. This provided funding to money-starved cultural institutions. Localities followed up with their own regulations. For example, Jiangsu province stated that cultural funding had to exceed 1 percent of the total local annual expenditure (Party History Work Office of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee, 2014: 1347). The result was that funding for cultural infrastructure exploded. The main beneficiary was infrastructure at the sub-county level, where cultural stations’ expenditure rose by 335 percent from 136.8 million yuan in 1995 to 596 million yuan in 1996, up from 16.4 percent of total cultural expenditures in 1995 to 43.2 percent in 1996. Activities expanded as a result. The number of exhibitions conducted in cultural stations rose by 246 percent in 1996. Likewise, the number of art performances increased by 225 percent and the number of training courses by 338 percent, with the number of participants in those courses increasing by 253 percent. However, at the same time, the number of cultural stations decreased by 6.8 percent and their permanent staff fell by 5.7 percent (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1996: table 18-70, and 1997: table 18-72). The party-state’s penetration decreased, while provision of cultural services became more concentrated in the hands of cultural stations. Hence, the expansion of cultural institutions at the grassroots was highly uneven and unfocused.

Retrenchment followed rapid expansion. One reason was neglect from the central authorities: the Fifteenth Central Committee of the CCP (1997–2002) did not mention cultural stations at all. At the same time, despite becoming a part of “civilized city” construction,<sup>4</sup> both the number of cultural stations and permanent staff numbers fell by around 7 percent. In 2001 alone, staff numbers fell by 9.4 percent to reach an all-time low. While Beijing in 1987 boasted 22 cultural halls and 346 cultural stations, by 1999 these numbers were down to 19 and 300 respectively (Beijing Municipal Local Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 2013: 759). Stig Thøgersen (2000: 131) also noted during a visit to one county in Yunnan that public funding had become “restricted” and the environment commercialized. Financial retreat was visible as well: cultural stations’ expenditures in 1999 stagnated and in 2000 even fell by 2 percent (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1999: table 20-67, and 2000: table 20-58). After initial excitement regarding new funding and input, cultural infrastructure receded from view during the late 1990s and early 2000s.



However, this was merely a blip and growth quickly picked up again. Overall, from 1995 until 2005, total expenditure per cultural station grew by 1,271 percent. In his 1998 government work report, the governor of Gansu province stated the aim of establishing a cultural hall and library in each county and a cultural station in each township (Gansu Provincial Local History Compilation Committee, n.d.: 1647). While infrastructure growth slowed overall, the average number of permanent staff per cultural station increased from 1.68 in 1996 to 1.87 in 2005. Rural areas boasted an even greater increase, from 1.5 to 1.82 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1997: table 18-63, and 2006: table 22-1). Emphasis fell on cultural stations, which slowly became hubs that catered to specific groups including the elderly, minors, and other disadvantaged groups such as migrant workers and people with disabilities and that provided a broader range of cultural services. In practice, this was done by supporting primary and middle schools in holding events, building more spaces, granting easier and cheaper access, constructing more sports facilities, and keeping longer opening hours. At the same time, the traditional functions of cultural infrastructure were maintained. From 1997 to the end of 2005, the number of exhibitions, training courses, and art performances increased by 30, 48, and 31 percent respectively (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2006: table 22-5). No new infrastructure was being built. Rather, existing institutions were used more intensively.

Grassroots cultural infrastructure reentered central discourse when the Cultural System Reform Pilot Scheme 全国文化体制改革试点 kicked off in summer 2003. The pilot scheme was intended to find ways to align cultural infrastructure to the changing economic, institutional, and social environment. Told to “face the grassroots,” localities followed suit. In Shandong, an opera and art festival involving a play titled *True Love in the World* 人间真情在, created by the Boxing 博兴 county cultural hall in cooperation with several other cultural institutions, attracted over 500,000 people over its six-day run. However, this was equivalent to only roughly 6 percent of the population living in the area (Binzhou Cultural Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 2011: 166). While cultural halls tried to leverage synergies with the broader cultural system, attendance at activities remained low. This was not a surprise: the 1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of other forms of entertainment, including television, karaoke dance halls, and the internet (Kong, 2005: 170–71). Furthermore, old issues of capacity were still prominent, as evidenced by several documents that continued to posit the aims of “each county having a cultural hall and a library” and emphasized the construction of rural cultural stations (“Guiding opinions on further strengthening the construction of grassroots culture,” 2002). The overall number of cultural stations fell rapidly by 8 percent to 36,874 in 2006—the lowest total since 1982 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2007: table 22-5).

## Expansion and Integration since 2005: Developing Cultural Services

Grassroots cultural infrastructure development after 2005 became more integrated, rural, regulated, and pervasive. Cultural halls and stations' inability to sustain themselves and reliably attract an audience necessitated a broader overhaul. This started in October 2005 when, under the concept of a "public cultural service system" 公共文化服务体系, cultural stations were transformed into "comprehensive township cultural stations" 乡镇综合文化站 ("Opinions on further strengthening the construction of rural culture," 2006). They were "comprehensive" in that they integrated book reading, radio, film and television, propaganda and education, theatrical performances, science and technology promotion, popular science training, sports, and youth activities. Cultural halls and stations had to "face the rural areas" and the "grassroots" and "formulate annual rural public welfare cultural project implementation plans, clarify service standards, improve service methods, develop mobile cultural services, strengthen free training and guidance . . . and incentivize citizen-run culture." The system also encouraged peasants to "establish cultural industries." While financing was to become even more diverse, coming from government, enterprises, and social groups, cultural institutions, it was stipulated, should not be commercialized. Subsequently, Premier Wen Jiabao promised more funding to support cultural halls and other cultural institutions.

The reemphasis on grassroots cultural institutions must be seen as a response to scathing criticisms. During the early 2000s, the government adopted a "hands-off approach" to cultural governance (Chan, 2011). A 2007 report blasted the massive decrease in rural cultural stations during the previous years, a result of a lack of investment and the "shrinking grassroots cultural front" (Ma, 2007). Over 81 percent of China's 32,706 rural cultural stations were no larger than fifty square meters. Unsurprisingly, then, *People's Daily* reported that 80 percent of rural cultural stations thought it difficult to "play a role in the construction of rural culture" (Liu, 2007). Attendance numbers reflect this: Shangqiu 商丘 city in Henan reported that the more than three hundred activities it conducted from 1998 to 2007 attracted a total of just 120,000 people—a minuscule number given the city's 2007 population of 8.2 million (Shangqiu Municipal Cultural Gazetteer Editorial Committee, 2008: 2). The state of rural cultural infrastructure was a wake-up call for the leadership. From 2006 to 2015, funding and expenses skyrocketed from 15.8 billion to 68.3 billion yuan and expenditures for mass cultural undertakings experienced a fivefold increase. At the county level, cultural halls spent four times more, while cultural stations' expenditures increased by a factor of six. As a percentage of overall expenditures, the focus was also

put on the local level. While in 2006 only 44 percent of all expenditures were at the grassroots, this had increased to 52 percent by 2015 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2019: 4; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016: table 23-26). The general trend of a grassroots focus, on rural areas in particular, is a thread running throughout the 2000s and into the 2020s.

The party leadership and administrative agencies integrated cultural stations into a conceptual and practical framework. In June 2007, the Politburo stipulated that it was necessary to strengthen the construction of comprehensive township cultural stations, rural film screenings, and bookstores, improve radio and television services, and provide a system of cultural information resource sharing (“Politburo holds a meeting to study the strengthening of the construction of the public cultural service system,” 2007). As a practical measure, the Ministry of Culture poured 100 million yuan into the construction of cultural station pilots in 534 localities to explore the new policy direction (“Township comprehensive cultural station construction project,” 2009). The party therefore embraced the building of an integrated cultural infrastructure at the rural grassroots that was focused on service delivery rather than top-down administration of culture.

Cultural stations were also more embedded in major policy initiatives. For example, they became part of the “building a new socialist countryside” development policy. Furthermore, a long-term (2006–2020) plan for “scientific quality” building among citizens stipulated that rural cultural stations must develop the capacity and infrastructure to launch science popularization activities. Considerably more important, however, was the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, which set more concrete aims, such as monthly rural film screenings, cultural stations for all townships and villages, digitization and cultural resource sharing, and the building of major cultural facilities. Cultural stations also were integrated into Hu Jintao’s signature policy of the “harmonious society” and became key to “satisfying the people’s cultural needs.” A plan for cultural development further concretized this. It mandated the building of around 25,000 cultural stations as part of rural cultural development (“Outline of cultural development planning during the ‘Eleventh Five-Year Plan’ period,” 2006). Lastly, a supplement to the Eleventh Five-Year Plan dedicated to rural cultural station construction aimed at building “cultural stations with comprehensive service functions” for all rural towns and townships across the country by 2010. Over the following years, several localities such as Hainan or Guangxi included cultural stations in their development plans.

To make up for the expected funding shortfall, 1 percent of urban housing development investment was directed toward the construction of public cultural facilities. This had an immediate impact on grassroots cultural stations. From 2006 to 2010 the number of cultural stations increased by 8.8 percent

and the number of people employed by a whopping 24.8 percent. Investment destinations included the construction of rural cultural stations, broadening radio and television set coverage, and building a national system for sharing cultural information. Increasing station numbers and higher urbanization rates meant that all rural areas had a cultural station by 2010. This also translated into higher penetration. Thus, by 2012, the average number of rural people per cultural station had fallen by almost 16 percent from 2006. Their spaces also expanded. From 2007 to the end of March 2012, 22,400 cultural stations with a space of 410.9 square meters per station were established. The average area reserved for activities increased from 175 square meters in 2006 to 391 square meters in 2011 (“Report on the implementation of the national ‘eleventh five-year plan,’” 2013). The focus of cultural infrastructure was therefore clarified, and their capacity and penetration enhanced.

More capacity also meant higher expectations for activities. Cultural institutions were mandated to “create and produce excellent cultural products that peasants love to hear, actively carry out healthy and progressive cultural activities for the rural masses, and strive to enrich the spiritual and cultural life of remote areas and migrant workers” (“Several opinions on effectively strengthening agricultural infrastructure,” 2008). As a result, cultural stations reoriented themselves, focusing less on exhibitions and more on training. While the number of exhibitions fell by 20 percent from 2006 to 2010, the number of training courses on subjects such as science, law, and business increased by 67 percent and participant numbers rose by 168 percent (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2007: table 22-5, and 2011: table 22-5). The party-state also pushed back against longstanding encroachment by private enterprises. Hence it was stipulated that public cultural halls and stations “must not be commercialized” or “auctioned off or leased out.” One locality in Shandong tried to get around expected financial shortfalls by justifying commercialization through the “social benefit” wrought by two operas, titled *Drum Rhythms* 鼓韵 and *Yang Guanghe* 杨广和, that won provincial and national awards (Binzhou Cultural Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 2011: 152). Nominally, the focus shifted from propaganda and entertainment toward services and an expanded role for the party-state. Cultural infrastructure was developed to protect and disseminate “non-material” cultural heritage to foster patriotism, propagate knowledge, and provide special services to people with disabilities. In practice, however, a survey painted a devastating picture: 79.2 percent of people reportedly lacked access to local cultural infrastructure. Even if activities were nearby, 77.9 percent of respondents were unable to attend since they had to work during the day and cultural halls and stations were closed in the evenings (Kaihua County Cultural Gazetteer

Compilation Committee, 2011: 61). To vast swathes of the rural population, cultural infrastructure had become irrelevant.

Given the attention in previous years, apart from new rules for cultural halls, regulations for cultural stations were also updated. Cultural stations were defined as “non-profit cultural institutions established by the county or township people’s government” and were to include a “multi-functional activity hall, reading room, a seminar room, a room to manage and share cultural information, outdoor activity venues, publicity boards, and other supporting facilities” (“Measures for the administration of township comprehensive cultural stations,” 2010: Article 7). Building on the abovementioned “Cultural Station Management Methods” from 1992, there were some continuities in terms of tasks. However, there were two significant differences. First, cultural stations did not have to propagate current party and state policies anymore. This meant they did not need to divert scarce resources and could focus on more popular activities such as training. Second, the rules emphasized integration. Vertically, cultural stations were to support county-level cultural halls in protecting cultural heritage, supervising the local cultural market, and launching quickly dispatchable “mobile cultural service” teams to “enter the village and the household.” Horizontally, cultural stations consolidated local cultural information using a digital platform. They played the role of a “grassroots service point” and provided cultural information and services. Later in 2012, new rules for rural stations’ construction further clarified their position within rural culture and enabled authorities to focus their attention on improving quality rather than focusing on quantity. Cultural stations were therefore turned into hubs to gather and distribute cultural information upward and provide cultural services to even lower levels. Hence, by the end of 2009, the focus of cultural work and infrastructure became more long-term oriented and integrative, resulting in an altogether more pervasive cultural arrangement.

The trend of turning cultural stations into hubs to reach the household level was further affirmed by the central leadership. In early 2010, propaganda czar Li Changchun called for the “center of gravity” of propaganda, ideological, and cultural work to move to lower levels (Li, 2010). As he noted later that year, the “focus and difficulty . . . lies in the rural areas and at the grassroots level.” As part of this, staff of cultural halls and stations had to be formalized, cultural workers needed to listen to the masses’ opinions and “satisfy the masses’ needs.” This was formalized later that year when it was stated that the “power of cultural propaganda work” in rural areas must be strengthened. In another speech in October 2011, Li remarked that the building of cultural halls, cultural stations, and village cultural rooms had to be strengthened. A December 2011 plan stipulated that by 2020 the public

cultural service system should be completed, with all key counties targeted for poverty alleviation having a library, a cultural hall, cultural stations, and villages having a cultural activity room. This emphasis hinted at problems. *People's Daily* lamented that cultural stations did not have the money to maintain operations and did not have “offices, books, and newspapers” (Zhi, 2010). Likewise, a report stated that only 49.1 percent of the staff in rural cultural stations were permanent. Their level of education was also low, with only 1.2 percent of all staff having a senior professional title. There were also problems with supervision. Activities did sometimes not happen or were repetitive, financial monitoring was lax, and the utilization rate of facilities was low. More importantly, often the needs of the locals were not met, resulting in useless activities or books that no one read. A 2012 citizen survey from Hangzhou shows that only 11 percent of 1,008 respondents regularly used cultural halls, compared with 61 percent for libraries. The main problems were a “lack of activities” (39%), “ignorance about activities” (34%), and “inconvenience” (29%). Explaining their inability to participate in events, respondents cited being “too busy at work” (47%) (Li, 2014). Vast swathes of people therefore dismissed cultural infrastructure that could not keep up with other forms of entertainment and local needs.

More funding, better equipment, and more staff for cultural halls and stations were a consequence. From 2010 to 2015, cultural expenses grew by 111 percent to reach 68.3 billion yuan. During the same time, expenditure on mass cultural services grew by 116.2 percent. Cultural station expenditures rose slightly more by 116.4 percent and outpaced expenditure growth in the countryside. Not only were new cultural stations being built, but existing ones were also refurbished and expanded. Special funding totaling 1.857 billion yuan was used to equip cultural stations with computers, desks, chairs, and bookshelves. From 2010 to 2015, the number of computers in cultural stations tripled. Staffing improved as well. While the county-level cultural halls' staffing ratios stagnated, they improved significantly at lower levels. For cultural stations, this meant they increased from 2.2 members of permanent staff for each station in 2010 to 2.9 in 2015. In the countryside, the figure improved from 2.2 to 2.8. In terms of penetration, by 2015, there was one cultural station for every 17,625 people living in the countryside—an all-time low (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016: table 23-26). The Twelfth Five-Year Plan from 2011 to 2015 and its program for cultural reform determined the basic parameters. It focused on upgrading cultural halls and establishing a “mobile service network” that would be “flexible and convenient,” with improved service abilities (“The cultural reform and development plan of the Ministry of Culture,” 2012). The focus from then on became enhancing the quality of services and events.

The 2012 leadership transition did not change ongoing trends and policy focused on improving existing infrastructure. The biggest indicator of this was the stagnation in the building of cultural stations. From 2012 to 2019, the number of cultural stations increased by only 0.4 percent while rural cultural stations decreased by 1.7 percent. However, total staff increased by 33 percent for all cultural stations and 31 percent for rural stations. Because of the increasingly urban population, the average number of people per rural cultural station declined to an all-time low of 16,452 in 2019. Funding and expenditures also increased massively. Expenditures of cultural stations and rural cultural stations increased by 119 and 103 percent respectively. By 2019, the average rural cultural station had doubled its expenditure to 389,502 yuan from 2012 levels. They were also better equipped, boasting 3.3 staff members per station in 2019—an all-time high (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020: table 23-25).

Even as the Twelfth Five-Year Plan narrowed space for policymakers, the new administration set forth new priorities. Perceived underfunding was one issue. The amount of central government subsidies was clarified. Accordingly, prefectural cultural institutions received 500,000 yuan per year, county-level museums, public libraries, and cultural halls 200,000 yuan, and rural cultural stations 50,000 yuan per year. The second major problem was integration. One way to better integrate different facets of the cultural infrastructure was by promoting digitization. A discussion of cultural halls and stations highlighted the need to improve digital infrastructure and shift it further to the grassroots in communities, towns, and rural areas. This was to achieve full national coverage of digital reading rooms and “invigorate the cultural life of the people at the grassroots level, and promote the informatization of the entire society” (“National public library development ‘twelfth five-year plan,’” 2013).

The party also proposed institutional means to resolve problems of integration. To remedy the lack of coordination and standards and the inability to cater to the people’s needs, the Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the CCP introduced yet another new institution: “comprehensive cultural service centers” 综合性文化服务中心. Comprehensive cultural service centers were to “integrate basic-level propaganda and culture, party member education, science popularization, physical fitness and other facilities” (“Decision on several major issues of comprehensively deepening reform,” 2013). However, even at the end of 2013, nothing could be done as long as the Twelfth Five-Year Plan was in effect. Even though cultural halls and stations were still important institutions in their own right and were at the end of 2013 deployed to further socialist core values and combat corruption by displaying items of “clean government” in exhibitions, their position was now changing. While



cultural halls were instructed to develop “red tourism,” they did not appear in the “National Party Member Education and Training Work Plan for 2014–2018” 2014–2018 年全国党员教育培训工作规划。Comprehensive cultural service centers did, however. This signaled a major reconfiguration: rather than reforming existing institutions, the new administration added a new layer. The leadership therefore upended the Mao-era arrangement while sidelining Hu Jintao’s “comprehensive township cultural stations” 乡镇综合文化站。However, even then the role and function of comprehensive cultural service centers were unclear. This only changed in 2015.

## **The Party Leads All: Services, Volunteers, and Ideology since 2015**

The comprehensive cultural service centers were portrayed as the solution to poor integration and ineffective service provision. An assessment in 2015 noted that the current cultural infrastructure had been unable to “meet the actual needs” of the people and the number of cultural facilities was still low and their organization “unreasonable.” Furthermore, cultural products were insufficient. Lastly, there was a lack of coordination and unified planning and therefore little integration of public resources (“Guiding opinions of the General Office of the State Council,” 2015). Comprehensive cultural service centers were intended to resolve this. They were to provide a “terminal platform” to “integrate grassroots public cultural resources that are distributed amongst different departments and are scattered and isolated” and coordinate the “use of people, finances, and resources.” They should be “a comprehensive platform for providing public services, a bridge between the party and the government to connect with the masses, and an important institution for grassroots party organizations’ cohesion and serving the masses” and were to be installed at the township and village levels. This meant that they could bundle the services of libraries, cultural halls, and museums. As such, they could be used for party member education and other campaigns such as those dealing with legal awareness, literacy training, and scientific knowledge propagation, among others. However, another function was integration with the grassroots social governance system. Here, cooperation meant carrying out pension assistance, child-care services, and population management, among other responsibilities.

To resolve the old problem of accurately understanding the needs of the people, the party proposed an “order-based” system (“Opinions on accelerating the construction of a modern public cultural service system,” 2015). Based on local resources and mass input, county-level governments would formulate cultural services catalogues for comprehensive cultural service

centers that could include “theatrical performances, reading books, newspapers, radio and television, film screenings, cultural and sports activities, exhibitions, education and training, and so on” (“Guiding opinions of the General Office of the State Council,” 2015). Citizens could then order services according to their needs. This catalogue was therefore a result of supply and demand. Furthermore, services were not only supplied by the government. Rather, they could be purchased from enterprises, social organizations, and other actors.

The broadening of services also required more staff. While staffing had increased, this was understood to still be insufficient. Given the party-state’s earlier disdain for privatization, it looked to volunteers to provide some services. Hence the concept of “cultural and artistic volunteer services” was introduced (“Opinions on the prosperity and development of socialist literature and art,” 2015). This was the first time that volunteers were mentioned with respect to grassroots cultural infrastructure. In summer 2016, volunteers were formally connected to cultural halls and stations. A Ministry of Culture regulation stipulated that “cultural volunteers” could be deployed in public cultural facilities and participate in theatrical performances, coaching/training, exhibitions, reading promotion, and caring for the elderly, minors, the disabled, migrant workers, and people in difficulties. Furthermore, they could also be used to organize mass cultural activities, cultural heritage protection programs, and unspecified “other” cultural services for free (“Measures for the administration of cultural volunteer services,” 2016). A Xi Jinping–chaired meeting of the Central Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform 中央全面深化改革领导小组 made the link between cultural institutions and voluntary services explicit. So-called “Lei Feng volunteer stations” 雷锋志愿服务站 were to be promoted in libraries, museums, cultural halls, art galleries, science and technology museums, and revolutionary memorial halls to implement “socialist core values” and “satisfy people’s growing spiritual and cultural needs” (“Strengthen foundations, emphasize integration,” 2016). Volunteers were therefore meant to combat the chronic lack of grassroots staff while also alleviating financial pressures.

This system was further expanded and legally embedded over the ensuing years. An impetus for expanding the network of comprehensive cultural service centers came from Propaganda Minister Liu Qibao 刘奇葆. In a conference with newly appointed county-level propaganda heads, he argued for building them to “integrate the use of resources” (“During a discussion with trainees,” 2016). Furthermore, a national law on guaranteeing public cultural services was passed. Accordingly, comprehensive cultural service centers should “strengthen the integration of resources” and provide the public with “books and newspapers reading, film and television viewing, opera,

legal education, art and science popularization, radio broadcasting, internet services, and mass cultural and sports activities” (National People’s Congress, 2016: Article 30). In early 2017, the aim was put forward for cultural halls and stations to serve 800 million people by 2020, up from 507 million in 2015. Previous aims of building an “order-based” system and government purchasing of public cultural services were repeated. A subsequent elaboration in the “Summary of the National Cultural Development and Reform Plan during the ‘Thirteenth Five-Year Plan’ Period” 国家“十三五”时期文化发展改革规划纲要 clarified that public cultural infrastructure should be “jointly constructed and shared” 共建共享 (General Office of the CCP Central Committee and General Office of the State Council, 2017). This further formalized the use of public–private partnerships in providing cultural services. Lastly, comprehensive cultural service centers were to cover 95 percent of rural areas by 2020 and 98 percent by 2022. Leadership, legal, and policy support therefore signaled a broad consensus regarding the future direction of cultural infrastructure development. Cultural infrastructure was to become better integrated, better funded, more capable, and more pervasive.

Despite comprehensive cultural service centers connecting party and state, this system was nominally under the hierarchy of the state. The longstanding state-centered institutional arrangement of the Mao era was upended with the piloting of a new institution in summer 2018. The “new era civilization practice centers” 新时代文明实践中心 were to promote “Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era” and “root it deeply in the people’s hearts” (“Stimulate institutional vitality,” 2018). They exist on three levels: “Centers” 中心 are located at the county level and plan and manage the allocation of projects, staff, times, and spaces (Office of the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization, 2020: 155). “Institutes” 所 function at the township level. Lastly, “stations” 站 are formed at the village level. Some localities also introduced a lower level: cultural “points” 点在 work or individual building units. The organizational setup is therefore conducive to greater grassroots penetration and maps onto the existing cultural hierarchy.

Civilization practice centers decisively reconfigure the party–state balance. Envisioned as hubs concentrating services, they build on the existing remit of comprehensive cultural service centers in integrating different electronic platforms, providing catalogues of services, and using volunteers. However, they have also gone further by explicitly building five platforms covering theory and propaganda, education, cultural services, science and technology, and sports. Under this new framework, cultural halls and stations’ tasks have remained the same with regard to education and propaganda, science popularization, and cultural entertainment. New is their reorientation

toward pushing a ruling ideology. While cultural provision was still in their hands, their activities now had to be more aligned with the party and be justified in terms of Xi Jinping Thought. Another way that civilization practice centers have shifted the party–state balance is institutionally. Rather than being lodged under the state, civilization practice centers are part of the party hierarchy. Chaired by party committee secretaries at the county level, they ultimately answer to the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization 中央精神文明建设指导委员会 chaired by a member of the Politburo Standing Committee.

The final way the institutional balance has been shifted toward the party is by attempting to resolve the longstanding problem of staffing and service delivery. While volunteers are linked to cultural services, civilization practice centers take this further. Their “main force” are volunteers. They come from two places. First, party and government agencies and state-owned enterprises. Second, local cultural talents, scientific and technological talents, science and technology commissioners, lawyers, retired cultural workers, advanced figures 先进人物, and literary and artistic volunteers, college students, entrepreneurs, and others (“Guiding opinions on the pilot work of building a civilized practice center in the new era,” 2018). Official plans mandate that 80 percent of party members in a county must reach twenty hours of volunteering per year (Office of the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization, 2020: 106). Indeed, at under two hours per month, this is not an overly ambitious number. Officials hope that they play a “radiating role” and entice nonparty members to join the ranks of volunteers. Unlike that in state bodies, nongovernmental organizations, or enterprises, tasks are left to volunteers. This also shows a general distrust of social organizations or enterprises that were previously sought out to deliver services. In theory, civilization practice centers are a massive leap forward for a cultural infrastructure that has since the Mao era been plagued by insufficient funding, staffing, spaces, and services. However, more events did not equal more attendees. For example, throughout 2020, Shanghai’s Minhang 闵行 district conducted 1,072 theory lectures, with fifty thousand people attending, constituting a mere 1.9 percent of the area’s population (“What do ‘Minhang theory’ lectures propagate?,” 2021). People therefore are seemingly rejecting the turn toward ideology and propaganda.

## Conclusion

When it comes to grassroots cultural infrastructure in China, since the Mao era, political campaigns, commercialization, volatile policy attention, and the addition of institutional layers have led to chronic underfunding,

understaffing, lack of focus and integration, and inability to provide cultural services. To an extent, the inability to cater to local demand for entertainment is rooted in the party-state's continued understanding of culture as a means to transform individuals and society. As such, the party-state is in constant and direct competition for people's attention with other forms of entertainment. While it vacated this space in the reform and opening up period, since 2018 it has invested enormous political, economic, and institutional resources in reoccupying it.

Under the aegis of the new era civilization practice centers, Xi Jinping Thought is now being produced at the grassroots. Furthermore, with party members taking on the bulk of volunteering and service provision under an increasingly tightly organized party-led organization of grassroots cultural provision, a party-led civil society has been created (Palmer and Ning, 2017) in which the CCP has reclaimed its original position as the vanguard leading the people by example. However, and perhaps most importantly, under this new system, grassroots cultural infrastructure is subsumed under the CCP and its ruling ideology. Everyday cultural work and voluntarism therefore serves to reaffirm and legitimize Xi Jinping Thought. Moving in lockstep, the November 2021 "Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century" described Xi Jinping Thought as embodying the "best of the Chinese culture," thereby explicitly integrating party ideology with Chinese culture. While the unification of culture and ideology does not bode well for independent cultural production and critique, from the leadership's perspective it resolves the longstanding problem of culture's role. Accordingly, culture becomes an add-on to the insatiably sprawling ideology of China's leader. However, while new-era civilization practice centers are a break with past practices and relegate mass cultural infrastructure to a supporting role, it might be difficult for local cultural leaders to justify volunteer services such as assisting the elderly in everyday chores such as preparing meals in terms of Xi Jinping Thought. Moreover, with people voting with their feet and their wallets and in a time of abundant entertainment offerings, the sustainability of the vast local cultural apparatus is very much in doubt.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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## Notes

1. Ellen R. Judd (1990) has examined cultural articulation in the border regions during the Yan'an period in the late 1930s and 1940s and focused on the clash between folk art and elite art. Likewise, Chang-tai Hung (1993) analyzes how traditional folk culture was "turned into a vehicle for mass political education." Examining drama troupes, DeMare (2015: 6) argues that this contradiction meant actors were torn between entertainment and propaganda, which opened up spaces for contestation.
2. Focusing on various actors in the field of cultural production, this impact has been widely documented. Perry Link (1987) looked at the development and limits of cultural reform during the Deng Xiaoping period in the early 1980s. Adopting the perspective of the writers, he showed how perceptions and realities of reform clashed. The main contradiction and tension during the period, according to Richard Curt Kraus (2004), was found between art and its commercialization. This is similar to Shuyu Kong's (2005: 2) analysis of the literary sector, where the interaction of "state policy and reforms from above and market forces" from below had a "corrosive influence." In his case study of one county in Yunnan, Stig Thøgersen (2000) also found that state retreat and commercialization undermined the party-state's "cultural and ideological role."
3. Unless otherwise stated, throughout the article all figures relating to staff members and employees refer to full-time employees.
4. As Guosheng Deng and Elaine Jeffreys show, "civilized cities" are supposed to be models of urban development, while simultaneously advancing Chinese socialist culture. This includes improving cities' "environment, services, security and human capital" (Deng and Jeffreys 2021: 525).

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## Author Biography

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