

# Art Theory in Xi Jinping's Policy

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## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I discuss about the existence of an art theory in current Chinese policies to answer the main research question: what is Xi's art theory and how does the Communist Chinese Party (CCP) conceive of arts and literature (*wenyi* 文艺)? Since arts and literature have been called upon to support and accelerate the achievement of the country's goals, I will analyze the current Chinese situation from the perspective of art. Moreover, I will suggest that the formulation of an art theory by Xi, during the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art in 2014<sup>1</sup>, might be referring to the past to stress the element of continuity as legitimacy for the CCP's rule and relevance.

In 2012, Xi Jinping was elected to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party and became the sixth communist leader of China. With Xi's election a new era started, leading to the implementation of a new policy, summarized by the term "China Dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦)<sup>2</sup>. This dream is supposed to coincide with the rejuvenation of the Chinese people and with the aspirations of every single Chinese person. Xi is committed to promoting this principle, and implements the policy of rejuvenation of the nation. This aim is to be preceded by social equilibrium and political stability, and it is paralleled by a stable economic development.

In October 2014, during the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art<sup>3</sup>, Xi developed an organic art theory presenting guidelines for artists to follow. Xi's art theory can be resumed in five major points: art is necessary for the realization of the China Dream; it should praise the Chinese culture and its people; it should work for the people and learn from them at the same time; it should praise the Chinese past to forge outstanding masterpieces that live up to the current times; lastly, the Party is the guarantor for art and literature<sup>4</sup>. Xi announces the relevance of art in the social and political context, and I believe he uses it as a means to strengthen the image of China and as the glue in Chinese society, favoring the achievement of the China Dream. Art is universal and particular at the same time. It is universal in the sense that it has often been deployed to legitimize ideas. On the other hand, it is very particular: visual images and creative works tend to have a stronger impact on people and often have the ability to deliver a concept in a more direct and appealing way. It easily integrates into people's everyday lives, often becoming a model for people to strive for. Xi's art

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<sup>1</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Xi, 2014, pp. 37-8.

<sup>3</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Creemers, 2015.

theory is then an integral part of the instrumental use of ideology within politics. Works of art should function as high quality pieces and propaganda at the same time. To achieve this, he is promoting old concepts and values that are stressed to be typically Chinese: Confucianism, the communist ideology, and more generally the exploitation of the past for constant innovation<sup>5</sup>.

What makes China's artistic theory relevant depends on two reasons: China is a rising nation, providing an image of itself as an alternative to the Western model, which is definitely not in line with the prevalent concept of Western exceptionalism<sup>6</sup>; secondly and most importantly, in the Chinese context art is conceived as an essential element within politics, strengthening the Party's image and legitimacy<sup>7</sup>. To support this concept of art, I believe it might be useful to refer to Mao's Yan'an Talks in 1942<sup>8</sup>; on that occasion he developed a comprehensive art theory that had social and political implications. The comparison between the two art theories is relevant for two reasons: on one hand, it justifies the urgency of a new comprehensive art theory. I believe Xi might be referring back to Mao's art theory to support the continuity of the Party's legitimacy and relevance. Xi operates in a particular time of big changes in the economic, social, and cultural fields. As a result, he might need to turn to the past and to expedients, such as art theory, to foster Party's strength and recognition. On the other hand, the differences between the two theories suggest two completely different eras and call into question the real need for art theory in Xi's era.

Notwithstanding the recognition given to it by the Party, art theory contains ambiguities, which might reflect a deeper ideological conflict. First of all, the target of art theory is not clear: the long speech about the arts emphasizes the masses, but it seems that Xi might be addressing educated artists and intellectuals; furthermore, art theory seems to address ordinary artists working within China who cannot gain recognition abroad. Secondly, the idea of combining the Chinese past with the present modernity, as well as the blending of typically Chinese and Western features is not easy to come to a synthesis. This exploitation of very different concepts to reach the masses and convince them to support and sacrifice for the China Dream, even though it is typical of ideology, might be too audacious.

With regards to Xi's art theory approval and implication, it is possible to assert the official acceptance of it by looking at the news and reports released by official press and institutions. But when it comes to individuals, then it becomes more difficult. My research illustrates art theory in the official environment of contemporary China and how official institutions and press tend to

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Xiaohong, 2015, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Marks, 2002, pp. 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Hart, 2016, pp. 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 69-97.

present a positive image of China. This is contrast with the often negative connotation given to China by Western countries. These narratives are the products of China's encounters with the West, and they are necessary to define Western knowledge about China and the reverse<sup>9</sup>. Both counterparts contribute to the creation of such stories, which tend to be sharp and to depict an unbalanced situation. As a result, we should try to present a more balanced image of China. Xi's China Dream is a new myth that suggests an alternative model to the West. Both the China Dream and Xi's art theory are contemporary concepts and contain many unknowns, thus, only the future will tell us about their real success.

My thesis is a qualitative research revolving around theory. Firstly, I will explore Xi's China Dream and artistic theory from the official perspective by reading Xi's book<sup>10</sup>. The two versions of Xi's speech at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art in October 2014 will be very useful to present the official view about the arts and to make a specific distinction between the report of the original speech<sup>11</sup> and the official version released in 2015<sup>12</sup>. I will then examine the relevance of art theory by referring to Kraus's *The Party and the arty in China: the new politics of culture*<sup>13</sup> and to Said<sup>14</sup>'s arguments about Orientalism; apart from these authors, I will also refer to E. Burke and D. Prochaska<sup>15</sup> to suggest that the interest of foreign countries in the East is often mediated by myths and narratives. The reports by Chinese and Western newspapers should also make me aware of the often unbalanced descriptions about China. Then, I will compare Xi's art theory outlined in the official transcript of the speech, with Mao's Yan'an Talks in 1942<sup>16</sup> to underline similarities and differences. I will read scholars' articles in Chinese, as well as newspaper articles in other languages for a more varied and balanced comprehension of art theory in China. I will also use *Ideology: An Introduction*<sup>17</sup> by T. Eagleton and *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China*<sup>18</sup> by D. Holm to talk about ideology and its downside.

My thesis will be structured in five chapters, plus the conclusion. First, I will introduce the China Dream and the main goals of the CCP, as they are intertwined with art theory. Specifically, Xi calls for arts and literature to reinforce his policies, thus I will dedicate the second chapter to the definition of Xi's art theory; I will analyze Xi's speech at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art

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<sup>9</sup> Burke and Prochaska, 2008, pp. 1-4.

<sup>10</sup> Xi, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Kraus, 2004, pp. 1-31 and 214-233.

<sup>14</sup> Said, 1978, pp. 1-28.

<sup>15</sup> Burke and Prochaska, 2008, pp. 1-7 and 36-51.

<sup>16</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 69-97.

<sup>17</sup> Eagleton, 1991, pp. 1-62 and 193-224.

<sup>18</sup> Holm, 1991.

in October 2014 and extract the main points of his art theory. I will point out the audience of the speech and suggest art and literature are part of Xi's ideological plan. Xi wants to achieve the China Dream and the rejuvenation of the country through the combination of steady and fast economic development, as well as the construction of an ideology capable of moving people. Nevertheless, it might be too audacious to be feasible. The following chapter revolves around the relevance of art theory. I will mention the concept of art in China and the Chinese rise as the two major explanations. In chapter 4, I will compare Mao's and Xi's art theories. I will suggest that the reason for Xi's formulation of an art theory has to be found in Mao's successful theory, according to the Party. Moreover, I will highlight the differences to present the completely different eras. In chapter 5, I will outline how the China Dream and Xi's art theory are presented by official institutions; moreover, I will argue that China is often depicted through black or white images. In the conclusion, I will summarize my findings based on my research, suggesting that art theory is conceived by the CCP, the Chinese government and Xi as essential for the realization of the China Dream. It is perceived as part of the instrumental use of ideology to unite the people and the Party, and promoted by the official media and institutions. In particular, it is viewed as the legitimacy to maintain the Party's rule and relevance. At the very end, I will speculate about the real effectiveness of Xi's art theory and its real urgency.

## 1. THE CHINA DREAM OF XI JINPING

Xi was born in 1953 in Beijing. His life has been tied to the CCP since his early youth. When he was ten years old, his father<sup>19</sup> was purged. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) Xi was prosecuted and sent to work in Yanchuan County, Shaanxi<sup>20</sup>. After many years working for the Party in many capacities, on 15 November 2012 Xi was elected the sixth leader of the People's Republic of China by the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CCP.

Since his election, he has stressed the urgency for reforms and started an anti-corruption campaign. Moreover, he established new government institutions like the Leading Group for Deepening Reform Comprehensively, and the National Security Commission<sup>21</sup>, and took charge of them. He set new programs to favor the market and the economic background; he has been giving relevant significance to the economic development, and also to ideological construction<sup>22</sup>. Soon after his election, he asserted to be “a man with a dream”<sup>23</sup>, and he coined the concept of the “China Dream” (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦)<sup>24</sup>. Although these two words seem straightforward and simple, they are full of significance and ambiguity. Their strength relies on this: it is such broad term that it could include anything, thus it is easy for the people to embrace it<sup>25</sup>. It can be any individuals' dream, but it is also the national and historical dream. As people constitute the nation as a whole, their individual aspirations should inevitably coincide with the higher ambitions of their country. This correspondence, emphasized by the Party, should boost the collective enthusiasm to sacrifice for the higher cause.

At a basic level, it theoretically revolves around three general achievements: the prosperity of the Chinese people, a strong military apparatus, and finally a sustainable economic growth. This ambition is what Xi summarizes with “rejuvenation of the Chinese people and the nation”<sup>26</sup>. It should be the highest hope of the people and of every single Chinese and it is seen as the possibility to grow up and develop in line with the nation and the times<sup>27</sup>. In order to achieve this important goal, the Party stresses the implementation of socialism with Chinese characteristics, a theory that has been developed and strengthened for a few decades now. It is the final product of the

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<sup>19</sup> Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, was one of the Communist Party's founding fathers, and supporter of Deng Xiaoping.

<sup>20</sup> Yu, 2012, pp. 295-7.

<sup>21</sup> Yijiang, 2015, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> Yu, 2012, p. 297.

<sup>23</sup> Grammaticas, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Xi, 2014, pp. 53-4.

<sup>25</sup> Hart, 2016, pp. 18-9.

<sup>26</sup> Xi, 2014, pp. 37-8.

<sup>27</sup> Lam, 2015, pp. xi-xvii.

combination of what is promoted as Chinese cultural uniqueness and the idea of modernization and development<sup>28</sup>.

Firstly, we shall consider the concept of the Chinese path: socialism with Chinese characteristics. Although the West is often perceived as dynamic and modern, Xi wants the Chinese people to trust their own features and use them to push towards the renovation of the nation. In order to do that, Chinese history and culture must be exploited to adapt to contemporary reality. The CCP stresses the values of the Marxist-Leninist and Maoist theories as the basic principles for the foundation of socialism with Chinese characteristics, but also the previous leaderships' achievements<sup>29</sup>. Hua Guofeng's opening up reform and its continuation with Deng Xiaoping are perceived as crucial to allow China to step into the global world; Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were both important as they emphasized respectively the moral values and the creation of a "harmonious society"<sup>30</sup>, as well as the theories of the Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development. These concepts, which along with many others such as Confucianism and Daoism, contributed to the creation of what China is now, are being promoted by the CCP and the Chinese government to become the glue that holds society together.

The CCP believes the precondition for the country's development depends on a strong country and a united society that shares the same beliefs. Thus, the general tendency is a return to the past: going back to core values and traditions. Xi calls traditional Chinese culture and its main specificities the lifeblood of the nation and perceives them as important sources for socialist core values<sup>31</sup>. In particular, the CCP is relying on internalized and deeply rooted principles that are already an intrinsic part of people's attitude and behavior. Among these, the Party is emphasizing the role of the CCP as the head of the family, the involvement of the masses, morality and virtue (*de* 德), and other Confucian teachings. On top of that, the China Dream develops on the belief that people are the *sine-qua-non* element to achieve the dream. The masses are pointed as China's engine: they must support and believe in their country, as well as work and sacrifice for its prosperity.

Finally, the Party is advocating its role as the only organ capable of guiding such big nation to what is supposed to be a total transformation<sup>32</sup>. Xi, along with the CCP, is dictating the path towards the China Dream and leading the people to the right direction. Regarding legitimization, the Party is promoting "inheriting the past and ushering in the future" (*Ji wang kai lai* 继往开来 and *Chengqian*

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<sup>28</sup> Xi, 2014, pp. 41-2.

<sup>29</sup> Xi, 2014, pp. 171-2.

<sup>30</sup> Lam, 2015, p. 273.

<sup>31</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Xi, 2014, pp. 15-8.



*qihou* 承前启后)<sup>33</sup> to maintain the people's approval. The inner situation with its big changes and great economic development, as well as external events, such as the "Arab Spring"<sup>34</sup> of 2011, has brought many uncertainties. In such an unstable scenario, the CCP strives for stability and harmony by recounting the past. Xi is encouraging the idea that only with a strong Party, can the people improve their lives and bring China to glory again.

In other words, Xi's policy, subsumed under the term China Dream, expects the Party to lead the country to a modernization, and its people to a general improvement by implementing reforms filled with the idea of socialism with Chinese characteristics and by mobilizing the masses to sacrifice for China's future. A propaganda campaign of the China Dream has been launched by the CCP since July 2013 when propaganda posters and slogans have been hung around Chinese cities to spread typical Chinese values and models for people to follow<sup>35</sup>. I think people believe in the China Dream, but it is very hard to assert what dream they support. The best way to know it would be interviewing Chinese people singularly, but this would require a lot of time and might not be successful anyway. Moreover, the implementation of a new policy is never immediately noticeable, thus it would not be easy to analyze the results at the present time. Up until now, Xi's China Dream is the new myth about China, presenting a China that can offer an alternative to the Western models<sup>36</sup>. The China Dream and Xi's expectations for China should be supported by his art theory, which should establish the modern aesthetic canons and also show his political strength.

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<sup>33</sup> CCTV, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Marinelli, 2014, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> CCTV, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Linehan, 2015, p. 275.

## 2. XI'S ART THEORY

On the occasion of the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art in October 2014, Xi outlined what can be called his art theory. The speech was delivered on the anniversary of Mao's famous 1942 Talks<sup>37</sup>. It focused on art and literature and their relationship with the people, and on the subordination of art to the Party's policy and in particular to the China Dream. Some parts seem to refer to what Mao had already asserted in 1942, that

“There is in fact not such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics”<sup>38</sup>.

In a similar tone, Xi promoted art and the realization of the rejuvenation of the nation with the following words

“Literature and art are the bugle call for the advance of the times, are most able to represent the spirit of an era, and are most able to guide the mood of an era”<sup>39</sup>.

### 2.1 The elements of Xi's art theory

Xi's speech presents five greater issues that are the fundamentals of what I call “art theory”. In order to reassume Xi's art theory, I have used the official transcript released in 2015<sup>40</sup>.

Firstly, Xi argued that art and literature are fundamental for the realization of the China Dream<sup>41</sup>. The rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and people strongly rely on the flourishing of their culture. Chinese culture is to be conceived as the lifeblood of China; Xi explains that to understand the specificity of modern China, people need to bear in mind that every country has its own culture, history and uniqueness, thus developing in a certain way<sup>42</sup>. Xi praised China for overcoming many difficulties within its development, claiming that these challenges became the symbols of Chinese ability to constantly adapt to new circumstances. Art and literature are the initiators of a complex and gradual process that should lead people to reinvent themselves. What Xi hopes for is transforming and developing the fine traditional Chinese culture in a creative way<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 69-97.

<sup>38</sup> Mao, 1942, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Xi, 2014, pp. 178-80.

<sup>43</sup> Creemers, 2015.

Secondly, as Chinese culture and people mutually reflect each other, masterpieces must adapt to their times<sup>44</sup>. Xi stresses the duty of artists: on one hand, artists must create works that attract people, which is possible only if they understand their audience. If they are close with their public and know their dreams, needs, hopes and customs, then they are able to combine them resulting into the production of art. In this way, works of art easily reach people and are very approachable. On the other hand, this influence is bilateral and people are affected by art too. Art must create something that can easily relate with the people and can fit in the surrounding environment, but at the same time it must inspire its final public. Thus, to Xi's point, art and literature must provide people with the best food for thought and "touch their souls"<sup>45</sup>. The mastery of the artist is not enough, moral and ethical values resemble the sprouts of splendid blooming masterpieces. As a result, personal integrity, quality and artistic morality are the fine ingredients for the creation of excellent art works, which are also the mirror of society.

The third main issue revolves around the masses<sup>46</sup>. It is argued that Chinese people are the quintessence of the traditional Chinese culture, thus they must be both the subject and object of artists. In particular, Xi suggests the implementation of socialist art; a kind of art that is dedicated to the people. Specifically, art must take inspiration from the ordinary people and their common everyday lives, while at the same time it also needs to serve them and help them out in the process of rejuvenation. People are considered as "the fountainhead of literature and art creation"<sup>47</sup> and the final target for the artistic production. Xi claims the importance of the linkage of art and the social, moral and educational spheres. Furthermore, he also argues that

"The creation of art can fly with the wings of imagination, but make sure art workers tread on solid earth"<sup>48</sup>.

The fourth issue discusses a similar topic: the Chinese essence is the soil of socialist art and literature<sup>49</sup>. Thanks to its specificity and uniqueness, China is required to follow a specific path and avoid copying other models. Chinese people should follow the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics and support the core socialist values<sup>50</sup>. Xi believes that art should be helpful in addressing Chinese typical features to the people: it must instill the core socialist values in people

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<sup>44</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Xi, 2014, p. 181.

and talk about patriotism<sup>51</sup>. To achieve these important results, artists are reminded of the glorious and splendid Chinese past. Already in 2012 on the occasion of the visit of the exhibition “The road of rejuvenation” (*Fuxing zhi lu* 复兴之路) in the National Museum of China, Xi stressed the importance of Chinese history and previous challenges to boost contemporary rejuvenation<sup>52</sup>. To follow the past and herald the future (*jiwang kai lai* 继往开来) and to inherit the past and usher in the future (*chengqian qihou* 承前启后)<sup>53</sup> are both very expressive idioms that explain the Party's intentions. Xi clarifies that this exploitation of the past to serve the future must be done in a thoughtful way: it is not just implementing the same old traditions, but the past must adapt to the current times and result in something new and creative that is still specific and suitable for the Chinese case. This can also be applied to Western influence<sup>54</sup>; the CCP asserted that China can gain inspiration from foreign models, but it needs to adapt them to its particular situation. As a result, artists and writers must use the past and foreign models to create something new that is still close to the people and celebrates the greatness of the traditional Chinese culture.

The last point of Xi's discourse establishes the Party as the guarantor for socialist art and literature<sup>55</sup>. This role of the CCP stems from the assumption that it works for the people's sake, as art does. As they are considered to have a common goal, which is to serve and nurture the people and to work as the unifying element in the society, they also have a very strong relationship. They both rely on each other: the leadership needs art to deliver its messages and principles, but art obviously needs the CCP to point out the correct direction of artworks and give it recognition. Favorable criticism is established to permit the rejection of “vulgar”<sup>56</sup>, and commercial art pieces, to guide the artistic production and to raise the aesthetics<sup>57</sup>. To gain recognition, official institutions in the artistic field stress the urgency to study Xi's artistic guidelines. Furthermore, the relationship between art and Party is not on the same level, as the CCP positions itself as the highest moral authority. Thus, it conceives of guiding artists as its duty and responsibility and expects them to act in line with the given principles. This is typical of the Chinese tradition, as Kraus asserts

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<sup>51</sup> Chin, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> CCTV, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> CCTV, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Cui, 2015.

“the arts typically bear social content, and as the bearer of ideology, they could not be left without guidance. The state's goal was to regulate the arts in order to secure a well-ordered citizenry”<sup>58</sup>.

The five major issues discussed above establish Xi's art theory. Overall, it is possible to argue that Xi gives great relevance to the people as the elements forming the society and the whole country. Art should unite the masses, especially by learning from and creating for them. Moreover, he supports the Party, as the guarantor of art, and consequently of the realization of the China Dream. The stability of both Party and the masses seems to be the assumption for the achievement of the final goal, which is supported by the artistic theory.

## 2.2 Literature and art

I believe it is useful to define the term “literature and art” (*wenyi* 文艺). This term, used during the Forum held in Beijing in 2014<sup>59</sup>, indicates the artistic and literary fields and their goods, namely literary works, movies, songs, pictures and in general creative pieces that are valued for their beauty or expressiveness. Art is a very broad field and this single word includes various means, techniques and forms all together. It is universal, in the sense that art is spread all around the world and it can take shape in many different objects. But at the same time, it is very specific and its definition is closely related to the surrounding environment<sup>60</sup>. For instance, the concept of art in China is completely different from the Western perspective<sup>61</sup>. China's art has a great intimacy with the state<sup>62</sup>. For this reason, I believe that the kind of art suggested by Xi is propaganda art. It should deliver a certain message, thus it becomes very hard to separate art from its “educative function”<sup>63</sup>. With “propaganda”, I stick to the historian Peter Kenez's definition:

"propaganda is nothing more than the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behavior”<sup>64</sup>.

Although in the West, the term “propaganda” has a really negative connotation, in the Chinese context, the long established intimacy with the state has made the boundaries between art and mere propaganda blurry. In particular, I think Xi's call for artists to create art is both a request for propaganda and artistic quality. In fact, an artistic criterion has a relevant role in the success of propaganda: if works of art combine together propaganda and high quality, they tend to be more

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<sup>58</sup> Kraus, 2004, pp. 10-1.

<sup>59</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Geertz, 1976, p. 1475.

<sup>61</sup> Nelson, 1997, p. 40.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Holm, 1984, p. 374.

<sup>63</sup> Holm, 1991, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Kenez, 1985, p. 4.

effective<sup>65</sup>. I suggest Xi is advocating the creation of high quality pieces of art, that can also support the Party and its values, and serve as a bridge between the masses and China's policies.

### 2.3 Art theory is for whom?

After discussing Xi's art theory, I would like to consider the audience of the theory: who is it for? In the official transcript released in 2015<sup>66</sup>, the Party presented Xi's art theory to the public listing five major issues, but without any indications of his target. As far as we are concerned, Xi might be addressing the masses and all artists with no exclusion. Nevertheless, I suggest the speech was designed for ordinary artists operating in the domestic environment. The explanation might be found by considering the speech and the current artistic environment.

First of all, it is reported that Xi mentioned at least 112 artists from China and all over the world<sup>67</sup>. This report should make us reflect on the audience of the speech; Xi's knowledge about arts and literature is more likely to impress intellectuals and educated people, rather than the masses, who might not even know all those famous artists. Thus, I believe the speech was not intended for ordinary people, but for intellectuals, educated individuals and officials. Urban citizens are claimed to be the protagonist of the China Dream and the fountainhead of the Chinese culture<sup>68</sup>. Nevertheless, it seems they might not be the audience picked for Xi's speech about the arts. I suggest they are the target of the discourse of artists, who, on the other hand, might be Xi's art theory's target, especially if we think that they were instructed to inspire the masses with Chinese tradition. This would explain the CCP's intention to present a leader who is not only good at governing the country, but who also has a broad culture.

However, I think there is another distinction to be made within artists. Nowadays, contemporary Chinese art is not unified: there is a great difference between the official art system and the international one<sup>69</sup>. I believe this is reflected in the artist's figures: those famous all over the world, and those operating in the Chinese environment. The first ones do not need the Party: they are already recognized in the global and market dimension. Nowadays, the artistic sphere is much more diversified and international than before as a consequence of a more globalized world<sup>70</sup>. Although this had led to many more channels to get recognition, it must have increased competition in the art world. As a result, ordinary artists, who cannot find recognition in the market or in the international scene, and need another kind of recognition, might form Xi's art theory's target. Thus, more

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<sup>65</sup> Holm, 1991, p. 5. For further information about ideology in China, see: Holm, 1991.

<sup>66</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Hu J., 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Liang, 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Moore, 2014, 6:22-6:26.

attention is given to domestic artists as the possible contributors to the creation of works in line with Xi's art theory. I suggest that those artists might need the Party's recognition as a springboard for a bigger success. In this way, Xi's art theory might be both a way to give domestic artists an official channel to gain recognition, and a means to achieve the China Dream. Artists might then create works displaying "Chinese spirit"<sup>71</sup>, in favor of recognition.

The aesthetic of the campaign launched to promote the China Dream by the Chinese government has a similar problem at pointing out the audience. In fact, the posters of the propaganda campaign present to the people models to internalize, but they are not emotionally close to the feelings of this generation. They exploit Chinese traditional painting styles or woodblock prints, but lose a contemporary and modern allure that might better appeal young people in the cities. Moreover, propaganda billboards hang on the sidewalks of many cities, but the images often depict scenes of the countryside, the workers in the fields, or far away landscapes. They are very distant from the urban environment and seem to evoke a completely different dimension of life. This problem might stem from the will to involve the whole Chinese nation and to unify the society as a whole. Urban citizens, constituting the majority of the population are definitely the protagonist of China's rejuvenation. But I think they are the audience of the dialogue subsequently developed by artists.

## 2.4 How is art theory addressed?

I think Xi's art theory might be a considerable part of his formulation of an ideology that has two priorities: satisfying the conditions for the accession to political and moral authority; and strengthening social unity in a specific and traditional Chinese way. He is fighting for the improvement of the Chinese people's living conditions and wealth, but in order to achieve this he needs first the people's faith in the Party and the country. Xi's "ideological imperative"<sup>72</sup>, with the consequent unified society and strong Party, would be the assumption for the realization of the China Dream.

Ideology (*yishixingtai* 意识形态)<sup>73</sup> is at the core of the leadership's policy. There are many definitions for ideology with slightly different meanings: it is the production of beliefs and values in social life; it is the ideas that stand for the conditions and life experiences of a specific group; it is often associated with a mythical resolution of real contradictions, plus it has to do with "legitimizing the power of a dominant class"<sup>74</sup>. Ideology needs to come first: in every country, if the people have good living conditions, then they tend to be satisfied about the country and willing to

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<sup>71</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Lam, 2015, p. xiv.

<sup>73</sup> Lam, 2015, pp. 94-6.

<sup>74</sup> Eagleton, 1991, p. 5.

sustain it. In a similar way, only if people are strongly united under the leadership, would the people then work for and support the China Dream.

To achieve this, art is exploited as the connecting element among the people, thus becoming an ideological tool. According to Marxist theory, literature and art form a particular type of human aesthetic ideology<sup>75</sup>. In Mao's era, the leadership exploited old and meaningful concepts to connect with the people. During the Yangge Movement in Yan'an<sup>76</sup>, the leadership used the past as a weapon to obtain the maximum advantage<sup>77</sup>. At that time, the principles of man's malleability and the power of persuasion were very central: examples of moral men were presented to the people on billboards and in theater plays, in a way that would lead to admiration and emulation. Man's malleability is one of Confucius' and Mencius' teachings and it encourages the use of persuasion and education, especially when combined with the presentation of a model to emulate<sup>78</sup>. In this way, society would be subtly educated and rectified. It is subtle because people unconsciously compare themselves with the model, and the confrontation, in tandem with admiration, willingly or not, somehow affects the individual. Admiration springs from the fact that the model is perceived as one of the highest moral examples within society, plus it is the subject everyone strives for. In Confucian society, the model to emulate was a man of noble character (*junzi* 君子); for Marx and Engels, it was the "New Man"; for Chinese people, the attitude and personality to strive for is the "good communist"<sup>79</sup>. Nowadays, the idea of emulation is still present, and the Party offers itself as the example to follow. I believe Xi is forging an image of the CCP that is more human and approachable; it is the highest moral authority, and at the same time it is close to the people. Xi, in his effort to rectify Party cadres, is showing that although the Party has to face some problems, it is still strong and willing to come to a solution.

The ideological project can be traced in the exploitation of anything pertaining to the past or traditional culture that might easily reach the people. The use of tradition is easy to explain: tradition contributes to the acceleration of modernization, and the re-conceptualization of tradition can be claimed to be a system for social control<sup>80</sup>. Modernity and tradition are intertwined and they are both necessary for one another; there would not be innovation without the past and there would not be a revitalization of tradition if it was not for development. Modernity "drives people to

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<sup>75</sup> Zhong, 2014, pp. 1-2.

<sup>76</sup> The Yangge Movement was a mass movement launched in 1943. It based on a locally indigenous form of art performed during the New Year. For further information, see Holm, 1991, pp. 115-313.

<sup>77</sup> Holm, 1991 pp. 115-6.

<sup>78</sup> Landsberger, 1995, pp. 34-6.

<sup>79</sup> Landsberger, 1995, p. 26.

<sup>80</sup> Xiaohong, 2015, pp. vii-7.



grapple with the paradoxical desire to reclaim a sense of continuity with the past”<sup>81</sup>. This concept is typically Chinese: in the West, time proceeds in a linear way, moving forward; in China the mechanism is circular and history is defined by cycles and constantly looking backwards. The concept of the China Dream and people's renaissance is in line with this: the people should experience a re-birth and the Chinese nation should rise again. On top of that, the re-conceptualization of traditions is often used as a mechanism of social control; because tradition is internalized in people, then they are almost unconscious of its implicit force<sup>82</sup>. In a similar way, Xi has been using some of the same language of previous leaders of the CCP, firstly, to strengthen the Party's historical line, and secondly because those words sound familiar to the people. Up until now he has used simple and visual phrases, grounded in ordinary people's knowledge, to refer to more complicated themes; for instance, the old term “tigers” (*laohu* 老虎) was used many times to describe the high-ranking officials<sup>83</sup>. There has also been a great resurgence of Confucianism, with special attention to filial piety and the concept of Confucian hierarchy<sup>84</sup>; moreover, he has revived many of Mao's ideological concepts and communist ideology, which is part of the tradition of China's leadership to legitimize the linear succession and development of the Party<sup>85</sup>.

Another evidence of ideology within the artistic theory is suggested in the article “Lessons from the Xi Jinping Book Club”<sup>86</sup>. What is quite fascinating is the remark the author makes on the artistic canon Xi mentions: the personalities mentioned were often “critics of their national cultures, rather than their cheerleaders”<sup>87</sup>. Among these figures are Sartre from France, Marcuse in Germany, and Lu Xun in China. This seems a bit confusing: progressive artists tend to criticize their own reality rather than praise it. Thus, it would not seem to adapt to the CCP's intention. Anyhow, Mao did a similar thing: in 1942 he highly appreciated the writer Lu Xun. Has Lu Xun lived in Mao's era, he would have had problems for his beliefs; but in 1942, in a different time, Mao highly valued that

“Lu Hsun used burning satire and freezing irony, cast in the form of essays, to do battle”<sup>88</sup>.

I believe Xi might be using the examples of progressive writers as figures who can lead China towards development and improvement. His talks about auto-criticism and favorable criticism

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<sup>81</sup> Cited in Chen, 2015, p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> Makeham, 2008, p. 102.

<sup>83</sup> Tsao, 2014.

<sup>84</sup> Hart, 2016, p. 16.

<sup>85</sup> Linehan, 2015, pp. 274-6.

<sup>86</sup> Mitchell, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Mitchell, 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Mao, 1942, p. 92.

support this argument, that artists should understand the pros and cons of China and point them out to the people for the country's constant improvement<sup>89</sup>.

As a final analysis, Xi's art theory is not merely a theory promoting art, but it emphasizes the creation of art within the political and social fields. It stresses that the Party's power comes from the people, and it considers the CCP as the highest moral authority. At the same time, the Party becomes itself the object of people's admiration. Accordingly to the Confucian system, once it is taken for granted that power is entrusted by the people, then the Party is also established for the common good and will not harm its people<sup>90</sup>. This results in the creation of a strong leadership which enjoys a lot of power and can lead the people to the achievement of the Chinese Dream without difficulties. I believe Xi is promoting an ideology that aims at strengthening and unifying Chinese society along with empowering of the Party. Xi's art theory is part of such ideology. It should establish the role of art in China as a means to achieve the rejuvenation of the nation.

Unfortunately, ideologies have their downside; although they are often considered as a means to unify, they are very seldom homogeneous<sup>91</sup>. This might be the biggest problem in Xi's art theory. As a dominant ideology is the final product of the differentiated interests of a certain group of people, the compromises and tensions within are often reflected in the ideology itself. Antonio Gramsci defined ideology as a complex and uneven formation<sup>92</sup>. I believe Xi's art theory might fall into this definition and be more a process of juxtaposing thoughts that might favor the Party accession to political and moral authority. On the other hand, Eagleton asserts that

“What makes an ideology powerful is also what tends to make it internally heterogeneous and inconsistent”<sup>93</sup>.

Xi's artistic theoretical plan is comprehensive and has strong points within it, but in reality it might contain too many contradictions and be too audacious. The art theory should address the society as a whole and unify it, and at the same time this should be done according to every individual's needs. Artists should work for the development of the Chinese essence, and at the same time they should adopt Western methods if that is beneficial to the final goal. The instrumental use of ideology during Mao's era was successful, but the times are different. It is impossible to agree upon the consequence of this art theory, but it is undeniable that Xi has been emphasizing arts and literature more than his predecessors. I believe he is again using ideology as an element of continuity with the

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<sup>89</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> Cited in Lam, 2015, p. 113.

<sup>91</sup> Eagleton, 1991, p. 45.

<sup>92</sup> Eagleton, 1991, p. 46.

<sup>93</sup> Eagleton, 1991, p. 45.

past to strengthen the Party and its credibility, but the changes that have occurred might be too relevant to justify another art theory.

### 3. WHY ART THEORY?

I have outlined Xi's art theory, but what makes this theory relevant? I suggest two arguments: first, the Chinese concept of art; secondly China's rise and Orientalism. I believe Xi developed an art theory because he considers it as part of the political program, thus making his whole policy strong and cohesive.

#### 3.1 The concept of art

First of all, Xi's art theory is relevant because in the Chinese context the concept of art is within politics. Art has a social and political dimension and it is often deployed to support and legitimize ideas<sup>94</sup>. In the West, the presence of the state is unacceptable. Since Romanticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the artistic concept of "art for art's sake"<sup>95</sup> was set and has been used until now. This term expresses the idea of an art with no restraints and free from anything. In the majority of European and American countries, this vision of the arts as a field free from limitations is considered as the right one, and consequently the only possible one. People do not understand art that bends to political pressure; in the West we think art needs freedom to flourish, but we tend to forget about Renaissance artists working for tyrants, Byzantine mosaics or Egyptian pyramids, all symbols of great power<sup>96</sup>. In China, art theory is conceived within politics, and the state is perceived more as a component of the family, rather than an external institution<sup>97</sup>. The origins of the exploitation of artistic works can be traced back a long time<sup>98</sup>. Literary works often took the form of manuals for people to learn how to behave in the correct way by presenting models to follow. In painting, many analogies were made between the elements in the picture and the real world: bamboo trees were often seen as a metaphor for officials who were morally upright and would not bend to the pressure of some bad influence.

More recently, the Yan'an period has become a crucial period for the history of modern Chinese literature and arts<sup>99</sup>. During the Yan'an Forum in 1942<sup>100</sup>, Mao Zedong explored the correct relationship between literature and arts and politics. He was the first leader to develop a comprehensive artistic theory in politics and society. Seventy-two years later, an urgency for a new art theory seems to have been felt. In particular, since Xi's election and after many years of less

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<sup>94</sup> Hart, 2016, pp. 1-2.

<sup>95</sup> This term was coined by the French philosopher Victor Cousin. It is contained in Cousin Victor, Wight O. W. (translator), *Lectures on the true, the beautiful and the good*, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1870, p. 157.

<sup>96</sup> Kraus, 2004, pp. 2-3.

<sup>97</sup> Jacques, 2012, p. 618.

<sup>98</sup> Hart, 2016, pp. 4-5.

<sup>99</sup> Holm, 1991, p. 15.

<sup>100</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 69- 97.

interference, the Party has started controlling the arts again. State leaders have always exploited art for its own capacity to

“link the perceptual solitude of personal life to the shared experience of rituals and routines”<sup>101</sup>.

The new guidelines work as warnings to the artists: they announce that the Party is back and powerful, and that more attention will be given to the content of art. After a period of humiliation, started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and further worsened with the Chinese-Japanese wars and the WWI, China wants to reclaim its glory<sup>102</sup>. In fact, from its current position as one of the most influential countries in the world, China can concretely attempt to propose an alternative to Western models through the return and emphasis on fundamental virtues of traditional Chinese culture<sup>103</sup>. Thus, art becomes for the Party another sign of development and prosperity<sup>104</sup> that contributes to maintaining the CCP's legitimacy.

### 3.2 Orientalism and the clash of civilizations

The second reason for this art theory's relevance depends on China's recent rise. This is the consequence of the global environment's aperture, and especially of China's extraordinary and rapid economic growth. After the financial crisis in 2008, China has become America's creditor, and the first economic power in the world, leading to the shift of powers from the West to China<sup>105</sup>. Since 2008, China has attracted more and more attention, and the idea of China assuming the leading role has become a concrete possibility. This change in the economic sphere, and consequently in power relations, has brought other implications. The most significant one is the proposal of China as an alternative model to the West. This is in sharp contrast with the image we have about China. In fact, our idea is shaped by the post colonial context: Western countries have always been emphasizing Western culture's superiority, and have been criticizing the Orient as backward<sup>106</sup>. Said named this tendency of the West as “Orientalism”<sup>107</sup>. This is described as a discourse of power and tells more about Western countries themselves, than the true circumstances elsewhere. The West has been supporting Western exceptionalism, namely the belief that the West is superior to anyone else and is the only right possibility<sup>108</sup>. As a consequence, since its rise, China has been framed in a negative way. China's lack of a multi-party democracy and the relatively

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<sup>101</sup> Kraus, 2004, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> Suisheng, 2015, p. 962.

<sup>103</sup> Linehan, 2015, pp. 329-338.

<sup>104</sup> Gungwu, 2014, pp. 311-2.

<sup>105</sup> Jacques, 2012, p. 585.

<sup>106</sup> Marks, pp. 3-9.

<sup>107</sup> Said, pp. 4-9.

<sup>108</sup> Marks, 2002, pp. 8-9.

spread poverty are not appealing to Western developed countries<sup>109</sup>. In the artistic case, it is the lack of freedom to create noise abroad. All the negative talks about China are the consequence of China's rise, which is something that nobody expected. Moreover, it is perhaps a defense against the big changes that we are afraid might occur in the future and put us in a dangerous position.

At a final analysis, the reason why art theory is noteworthy depends on both the concept of art in China and the relationship between West and Orient in this time of shifting powers. Art in China is embedded within politics. It spreads ideas that have a strong social and political meaning. Moreover, art perhaps would not make such noise if it was not for China's rise and the number of people criticizing it. It might be through critiques or appraisal, but the more people talk about China, the more popularity and attention China gains. In a similar way, this is true for Xi's art theory. The West tends to criticize and ridicule it without even trying to grasp its real meaning and implication. We do not consider the great difference in the conceptualization of art and we erroneously tend to imagine state intervention at every artistic turns<sup>110</sup>.

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<sup>109</sup> Jacques, 2012, p. 609.

<sup>110</sup> Kraus, 2004, p. 6.

#### 4. MAO'S AND XI'S ART THEORY

After Mao's art talks in Yan'an in 1942<sup>111</sup>, constituting the first comprehensive Chinese art theory, the only other artistic theory was the one outlined by Xi in 2014<sup>112</sup>. As a result, I would suggest the urgency to compare these two art theories. I will mention some of their common points, as well as differences. I believe the major similarity is the control over the artistic field and the exploitation of art as part of the ideological priority. I suggest he refers to Mao to legitimize his ideology and to maintain the CCP's rule and relevance. This urgency might be explained by the current political situation: although the CCP has now been established for many years, it is a time of uncertainties. China is the most powerful country and this has translated into becoming an alternative to Western models. Secondly, Xi is the first leader not to have been appointed by his predecessor. While previous leaders after Mao had been hand-picked, Xi's selection was the result of "a broad consensus among the top power elite"<sup>113</sup>. Nevertheless, the two theories are very different: in Mao's case, the ideology is new and aims at the CCP's victory; Xi's ideology, on the other hand, goes back to the past and owes to Mao's thought to maintain the leadership's stability. Thus, I believe the comparison might be extremely useful to underline similarities and differences for a better comprehension of Xi's art theory.

It has been asserted that a forum, such as the one when Xi delivered his speech in 2014<sup>114</sup>, had not taken place since Mao's Yan'an Talks<sup>115</sup>. Their two speeches present five major issues, with similar contents, but in a different arrangement. In fact, while Mao's first topic revolves around the masses, Xi's presents his aim, namely the rejuvenation of the nation through the prosperity of Chinese culture. Secondly, Xi argues the importance of art inspired by the people. Similarly, Mao answers his question of how to serve the masses. The third issue revolves around the Party's undertaking for Mao; and it is about the consideration of people as the "fountainhead"<sup>116</sup> of art for Xi. Following, Xi talks about the beliefs literature and art must favor; in other words, he supports the Chinese spirit. Mao, on the other hand, concentrates on the political and social criteria to judge art, arguing they are the two aesthetics' priorities. Last, Xi announces the Party is the guarantee for the right development of literature and art; Mao, on the other hand, argues the final goal of his artistic talk is a rectification of the people. I believe this first analysis might already underline the great difference between the two, since Mao needed to unify the people and the Party, especially because the CCP

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<sup>111</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 69-97.

<sup>112</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>113</sup> Yijiang, 2015, p. 58.

<sup>114</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>115</sup> Xu, 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Creemers, 2015.

was not certain to be victorious. Xi, on the other hand, is promoting an ideology to attest the CCP's rule and relevance. Xi promotes the China Dream in favor of a stable and peaceful development. In a period of big changes, he needs stability and to maintain his legitimacy, and that of the CCP.

The speeches contain similarities, both in style and content. First, both discourses use an authoritative and propagandistic tone: strong sentences, rules and bans are present throughout the speeches. Secondly, they use expressions and metaphors which create a bond with the people: "Spring snow"<sup>117</sup> and "Rustic song"<sup>118</sup> are terms that appear in both Xi's and Mao's speeches. They are the titles of two songs of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. "Spring snow" was a song of a higher literary level, harder to understand and meant for an elite; the other one was much more appreciated by the grassroots even if it was not as good stylistically<sup>119</sup>. Both Xi and Mao promote "Rustic Song", suggesting the relevance of connecting people with artists and of a kind of art reaching the masses. The creation of art is argued to be for the people, who are the starting point, the subject and critics of literature and art<sup>120</sup>. Mao asserted that art should be grounded in socialism, serve the country and reflect people's lives<sup>121</sup>. Seventy-two years later, Xi claims that "art gives wings to the imagination, but we must keep our feet firmly rooted to solid ground"<sup>122</sup>.

Thirdly, they both consider social effects as the most important criteria to judge the artistic intention. Art works "must have muscle and bones"<sup>123</sup> and they must record the practice of the people and their progressive needs. Mao and Xi understood the importance of raising standards of literature, and of promoting its popularization: literature and art are claimed to be the reflection of people's lives<sup>124</sup>; thus, they should raise hopes and expectations by being more intense, more typical and more universal. In their view, the arts should support socialism and critically assimilate ancient traditions and foreign elements to create something that can live up to the current times.

Mao mentioned Lu Xun as the model of a good writer: Lu Xun did not only expose and tell a story, but he attacked the current reality and its fallacies. In Mao's era he was considered the "nation builder"<sup>125</sup>. His essays were exploited to support the need for revolution, but it was a misreading of his essays<sup>126</sup>. In fact, Lu Xun held ambiguous beliefs: he approved of revolution, but criticized the repressive force within it. Moreover, he did not completely support either left or right, but tried to

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<sup>117</sup> Mao, 1942, p. 69.

<sup>118</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>119</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 97-8.

<sup>120</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>121</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 69-72.

<sup>122</sup> Xu, 2014.

<sup>123</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>124</sup> Mao, 1942, p. 82.

<sup>125</sup> Davies, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> Davies, 2013, p. 318.



defend the left as he believed it offered the best hopes<sup>127</sup>. Mao supported him because Lu Xun championed the mission of writing for the masses and called for a literary revolution. Nevertheless, if he had lived in Mao's era, he would have had "to conform to the Party's directives or risk incarceration"<sup>128</sup>. In the 1990s, Lu Xun's writings were reassessed and in 2007 his *The True Story of Ah Q* was removed from the literature syllabus for senior high school students. This move was justified by asserting that the book was not relevant to present times<sup>129</sup>. Nevertheless, Lu Xun was mentioned again in Xi's speech in 2014. Lu Xun is praised for his call for a literary revolution which enhances the renovation of human minds and shapes moral character<sup>130</sup>; and for his recognition around the world as a representative of China's greatest writers. Xi's idea of revolution seems to adapt better to Lu Xun's as they both want a renovation of the spirit rather than a violent change.

Although Xi's policy has strong similarities with Mao's, they are not the same. First of all, they live in two different eras<sup>131</sup>. Mao operated in a particular time: on one side, it was a period of political instability and internal struggle; the Party was not certain to be victorious, thus it needed support. On the other side, China had to face a Japanese invasion. Xi is in a completely different environment: when he delivered that speech he had already been in charge for more than a year and the Party too had been in power for more than 60 years; moreover, he is leading a strong and powerful country. Although they use their personal experiences to support their arguments, they differ very much, as Mao recounts how he got to know the peasants and realized they are not inferior to intellectuals<sup>132</sup>; Xi goes back to a night in 1982 before taking up his work assignment in Zhending County, when he was told to "go deeply into the middle of the peasant masses"<sup>133</sup>. But the contexts are obviously different. Mao went there spontaneously and he was one of the few truly believers in peasants; Xi is forced to go. He was sent there during the Cultural Revolution in order to learn from the masses. Xi's past has been recounted perhaps in an attempt to show that he is close to the people, becoming a mere propaganda tool.

Secondly, they both emphasize the mass line, but they have different aims. Mao urged for an awakening of the people in order to start a revolution, opening his famous speech by mentioning his goal and the urgency of it; his aim was to "ensure that revolutionary literature and art follow the

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<sup>127</sup> Davies, 2013, p. 331.

<sup>128</sup> Davies, 2013, p. 328.

<sup>129</sup> Davies, 2013, pp. 326-7.

<sup>130</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>131</sup> Walder, MacFarquhar, Shirk, Schell, 2015.

<sup>132</sup> Mao, 1942, p. 73.

<sup>133</sup> Creemers, 2015.

correct path of development”<sup>134</sup>. Mao's speech is a discourse to examine the relationship between the artistic field and revolution. He stresses the importance of cultural and military fronts in the struggle against Japan. Xi, on the other hand, does not want chaos and riots, but stresses the moral and ethical spheres to make people righteous<sup>135</sup>. Instead of revolution, he talks about a “rejuvenation” of the Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴) and a restoration of Chinese culture. Revolution has a long tradition in Chinese political discourse, and it has been conceived of as an assumption for reforms<sup>136</sup>. But recently, in the post-Mao era there is a preference for stability and prevalence of reforms<sup>137</sup>. Although Hanna Arendt's definition of revolution requires “novelty, beginning and violence”<sup>138</sup>, the current trend gives more relevance to stability and strengthening the Party's system. Xi is emphasizing the unity of the Party and the old concept of harmonious society in order to achieve the rejuvenation of the nation. The creation of a strong image of himself and the Party is fundamental for the CCP's correct decision-making and effective implementation of policies<sup>139</sup>.

Thirdly, the type of social struggle is different: the mass struggle of Mao's era has been converted into an effort towards national greatness, thanks to the awakening of the masses<sup>140</sup>; Xi would like the Chinese to sacrifice for the higher cause of the country and Party to allow the realization of the China Dream. They both pointed out the problem of quantity over quality, but their ideas are not very similar. Although they both approve of popularization and raising the standards of art and literature, they have different priorities. Mao criticized the past negligence of popularization and asserted that “popularization is the most pressing task”<sup>141</sup>. Xi on the other hand believes that the current trend of “impetuosity”<sup>142</sup> in artistic creation should be substituted by quality; artists are more worried about creating a work of art that can gain popularity in the market, rather than a piece with depth and quality. Although art should not become the “slave of the market”<sup>143</sup> and comes only after the main ideological and moral priorities, the economic sphere is not completely rejected; market competition is in fact appointed as the responsible for vitality and innovation<sup>144</sup>.

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<sup>134</sup> Mao, 1942, p. 69.

<sup>135</sup> Walder, MacFarquhar, Shirk, Schell, 2015.

<sup>136</sup> Marinelli, 2014, p. 18.

<sup>137</sup> Marinelli, 2014, pp. 18-9.

<sup>138</sup> Cited in Marinelli, 2014, p. 19.

<sup>139</sup> Zheng and Chen, 2009, p. 21.

<sup>140</sup> Chin, 2015.

<sup>141</sup> Mao, 1942, p. 82.

<sup>142</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>143</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>144</sup> Creemers, 2015.

Xi mentions the social and economic effects in the evaluation of art, while Mao emphasized the political and social ones. Although they both highly value the people, there is a fundamental difference in the individualization of their audience. Mao describes at length the stratification of the people and provides many details about the audience of art: art and literature must address the majority of the people, namely the workers, who are the class leading revolution<sup>145</sup>. Xi, on the other hand, defines his audience as “the people of all ethnicities in the entire country”<sup>146</sup>. In Xi's era, the majority of people belong to urban areas rather than the country-side. The people Xi addresses live in big cities and have regular contact with the outside world.

Regarding foreign and traditional values, there is another difference between the two theories. Mao approved the use of the past and foreign elements, but only considered them as means to an end, namely to create something innovative. His position towards this topic is quite ambiguous: in theory, he supported the rejection of folk and popular beliefs as they showed the backwardness of China; but he could not deny the practical implications of such ancient values deeply rooted in people's lives<sup>147</sup>. Xi has a similar method: he asserts the effectiveness of such blending and he further favors the revival of ancient elements, such as Confucian values and folk traditions. He recognizes the relevance of Western contribution, and he further highlights the importance of exchanges with the outside world. Art and literature are conceived as the best means of communication and a way to discuss society and human life. To Xi's point of view, it is not only China that is interested in the West, but the reverse is also true. He develops an issue that Mao touched upon only briefly: Mao did not mention bilateral exchanges and seemed more concerned about Japanese attacks. Among the models Mao mentioned were Lu Xun and Soviet figures, such as Fadeyev<sup>148</sup>. Xi, on the other hand, refers to artists and famous personalities from all over the world.

Regarding the figure of the artist and the art world, I believe there is another notable difference. In 1942, artists could only be recognized through the Party. They needed to follow the principles outlined by Mao and to be careful. Moreover, official art was the most prevalent one<sup>149</sup>. Nowadays, artists have more potential channels of recognition and are less dependent on the CCP. Thanks to China's opening up and subsequent entrance into the global market, art pieces circulate more easily and can gain attention in many different ways. The artistic scene is much more diversified and international than before<sup>150</sup>. Artists recognized abroad, and succeeding in the market, are probably

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<sup>145</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 76-8.

<sup>146</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>147</sup> David, 1991, pp. 15-17.

<sup>148</sup> Alexander Fadeyev was a famous Soviet writer, who was translated by Lu Xun. Mao, 1942, p. 96.

<sup>149</sup> Mittler, 2008, pp. 476-8.

<sup>150</sup> Moore, 2014, 5:13-5:42.

not affected by Xi's art theory; they no longer need the Party's recognition and they have alternative methods to remain in the spotlights. The general tendency among artists is to highly value the market and to create easy to sell works<sup>151</sup>. Contrary to Mao's era, now there is a Chinese artistic market which is very young, although it is maturing very fast<sup>152</sup>.

As a final analysis, I believe the comparison between Mao's and Xi's art theories is relevant because it reveals the CCP's main reason for Xi's art theory to exist. Its real meaning owes a lot to Mao's. In particular, I suggest that Xi might be developing a comprehensive art theory like Mao did because this might give him and the Party an ideology that enables them to endure the legitimacy of the Party's rule and relevance. The fact that Mao's art theory successfully enabled the CCP to be victorious is the reason for Xi to look backward and stress an idea of continuity within the Party's rule. Nevertheless, the differences illustrate the wide gap between the times of the two theories' formulation, suggesting the results might not be similar.

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<sup>151</sup> Sheldon, 1997, p. 112.

<sup>152</sup> Moore, 2014, 6:22-6:26.

## 5. DIFFERENT IMAGES OF CHINA

In this chapter I would like to highlight some issues that I find interesting for the final evaluation of Xi's art theory. I will take into consideration the late release of the official transcript of Xi's speech and compare the official version with the reports released by the news just after the Beijing Forum<sup>153</sup>. Secondly, I will focus on the different narratives depicting China. I would like to show how the Party and official media present the China Dream and Xi's art theory; and how this is in sharp contrast with the negative image presented by the West.

### 5.1 The delay of the official transcript

At the time Xi delivered his speech at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art in 2014<sup>154</sup>, there were no records of it and the official transcript was published one year after the event. No reason has been given by the CCP for such delay. I have read Creemers' analysis of the two versions and I have pointed out the major differences. For the analysis of the 2014 speech I had a summary of Xi's words<sup>155</sup>; for the examination of the official version I took into examination a detailed report<sup>156</sup>.

In the 2014 version, Xi mentions some problems, such as the "quantity over quality", and the "vulgarity" issues, but he does not talk at length about them. In the 2015 speech, the Chinese situation seems to be better outlined: Xi mentions other problems the artistic field needs to face: the foreign element, the lack of creativity, the relevance given to the market and the uncertainty of this period of big changes, which makes the moral and social spheres even more unstable. The market is rejected as the first priority in both cases, although it is argued to be necessary in order to foster competition and vitality in artistic production<sup>157</sup>. Regarding the foreign topic, in both versions it is clear that artists should engage with both Chinese and foreign specificities and use innovative and foreign elements to promote Chinese art pieces. In the latter speech, Xi adds that the West is attracted by China, and that they want to know about it, in an attempt perhaps to raise Chinese people's pride towards their ancient traditions. On top of that, in the earlier speech, the Party and the China Dream seem a bit overshadowed by the relevance given to the people, who are defined as "the fountainhead of literature and art creation"<sup>158</sup>. The Party and the China Dream are both mentioned, but their urgency does not stand out as much as in the official speech. In the latter version, the Party is defined as "the fundamental guarantee for the development of Socialist

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<sup>153</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>154</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>155</sup> Creemers, 2014.

<sup>156</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>158</sup> Creemers, 2014.

literature and art"<sup>159</sup>. Moreover, the China Dream and its rejuvenation of the nation, these two terms, are mentioned numerous times. On top of that, in the official version, Xi mentioned a long list of names of artists from all over the world: among these, the Ancient Greek Euripides', Sophocles', and Aristophanes' tragedies and comedies; Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Rachmaninov from Russia; the English Milton, Byron and Shelley; he also pointed out that France had outstanding artists such as Molière, Stendhal, Balzac, Cezanne, Monet, Manet, Millet, Debussy and many others; in Germany there were Goethe, Lessing, Schiller, Beethoven, Schumann, Wagner and so on; Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Hemingway along with many others were skilled writers in America; he mentioned his visit to India and Hindu poems, dances, as well as paintings<sup>160</sup>. Notwithstanding the long list of artists, it is not clear whether or not he also cited them in the original conference. The Internet and the use of technology do not seem to be mentioned in the 2014 version; in the 2015 speech, great relevance is given to the Internet as another means to further develop and spread the principles transmitted by propagandistic arts.

The earlier speech might be more spontaneous than the official transcript, which seems revised and further developed. The later one presents a very positive image of the Party, and the China Dream, and it seems to outlay a more balanced view of the current Chinese situation. Perhaps we should juxtapose Mao Zedong's 1942 speech with Xi's to find an explanation for the long delay. The long time for the official speech in 1942 to be released was explained as a necessity to maintain a low profile: it was unwise to expose Mao's principles and ideas to the full glare of the audience at once, thus just low-key reports were released in order to gradually implement the theory accordingly with the people's response<sup>161</sup>. This strategy maybe has also been used in the case of the speech delivered by Xi. Perhaps the CCP wanted to spread the precepts at first, evaluate the reaction and then act. The changes in the two versions might stand for a rearrangement done according to the reactions and feedbacks after the speech of October 2014. It was probably moulded to better apply to artists' requirements and to gain more popularity.

## 5.2 The acceptance of Xi's art theory and China Dream

The implementation of this art theory is in progress, and there are already some reports that present how Xi's art theory is currently being achieved. In particular, it is interesting to notice how the Party wants to present China and Xi to the domestic and international environment. The China Dream and Xi's art theory are both presented through narratives that do not give a balanced image

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<sup>159</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>160</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>161</sup> Holm, 1991, pp. 15-17.

of China, but display it either in a very positive or negative way. In fact, it is either the official Chinese press or Western journalists that report news and create buzz about China.

From the Chinese perspective, the official approval and acceptance of Xi's words is the one prevailing. It is telling to briefly take into consideration "Xinhua News Agency", the official People's Republic of China press agency. First of all, it does not only report Xi's speeches and his exact words emphasizing the China Dream, but it also tries to demonstrate the acceptance it has in China and its relevance in other countries<sup>162</sup>. There are not any critiques in the news and the China Dream is sponsored along with the need of reforms. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that Xinhua News Agency suggests a connection between Xi and Mao and Mao's formulation of an art theory in 1942<sup>163</sup>. It also underlines the exploitation of art as a Chinese tradition and blames the market for the production of vulgar artworks<sup>164</sup>. When it comes to the news about Xi, he is presented as an educated leader, knowing Li Bai and other classical figures<sup>165</sup>. Last, Xinhua reports examples of the implementation of Xi's art theory, suggesting the success of his theory; for instance, it reported the re-make of the revolutionary opera "The White Haired Girl", which was claimed to be a "timeless tale showcasing the national spirit"<sup>166</sup>. The "People's Daily" (*Renminwang* 人民网), another official newspaper, similarly reported in 2015 that a theater company performed in some areas hit by earthquake, such as Sichuan, Yunnan and other places, to comfort and distract people<sup>167</sup>. On top of that, other official artistic institutions and figures replied to Xi's speech in 2014 reinforcing his ideas. At a final analysis, it is possible to argue that not surprisingly the stately run news agencies are presenting a wholly positive image of the China Dream. They are trying to build the fundamentals for people to believe in Xi, the Party and the Chinese government. They talk about the China Dream as if it was well known and already accepted by every individual; they further sponsor it and they present the figure of a leader and Party caring for the people and their demands; moreover, they highlight the glorious 5000 years of Chinese history, announcing a resurrection of the past Chinese glory<sup>168</sup>. In this way, they justify the implementation of reforms and the urgency for an art theory in politics. Thus, they suggest an image of China, in the domestic and international environments, as a strong and powerful nation.

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<sup>162</sup> Chen, 2013.

<sup>163</sup> Fu, 2014.

<sup>164</sup> Fu, 2014.

<sup>165</sup> Liu, 2012.

<sup>166</sup> Hu Y., 2015.

<sup>167</sup> Cui, 2015.

<sup>168</sup> Linehan, 2015, p. 339.

On the other side, there are the myths created by foreigners, which are the results of Orientalism<sup>169</sup> and Western exceptionalism<sup>170</sup>. In the Western context, this is translated into journalists' tendency to ridicule and exaggerate in reporting news about China. In particular it is argued that in the West, news stations display a preference for negative tone news, in which the political and economic issues seem to prevail<sup>171</sup>. As a result, the West tends to depict China in a negative light. Various Western newspapers associate Mao and Xi, but in a different way from Xinhua's. Xinhua, by recounting Mao, emphasized the legitimization and the need for a new art theory; in the Western context, Xi is claimed to be the most powerful and authoritative leader after Mao<sup>172</sup>. In the artistic field, they criticize the lack of freedom and state intervention, warning the readers with strong and vivid words, such as "assault on artistic freedom"<sup>173</sup>. On the occasion of the release of the official report in 2015 of the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art, Western journalists did not hesitate to highlight the differences between the two speeches and to speculate about them. They claimed that in the latter version there was no mention of Xi's critique of the "strange looking architecture"<sup>174</sup> of Beijing's skyline, such as the CCTV headquarters. Furthermore, the appraisal of the young bloggers Zhou Xiaoping and Hua Qianfang was also reported to be missing<sup>175</sup>. According to Western journalists, the case of the nationalist and anti-American blogger Zhou Xiaoping created much discussion on the Internet<sup>176</sup>. This young Chinese blogger was presented as an anti-American blogger, who wrote posts and criticized America. Another example was the news blaming the Chinese government for the destruction of villages as the centers of regional cultural traditions<sup>177</sup>. The project to move 250 million villagers into new and modern cities was immediately condemned and described as a process of forced urbanization responsible for the vanishing of folk traditions<sup>178</sup>. Although this phenomenon, typical of developing countries, is spread all over the world, the Chinese case created much discussion. The general tendency is to condemn or ridicule China without trying to understand the situation. The interference of the state in the artistic field is rejected by the West, but they do not consider the fact that it is a typical Chinese feature, and that the Chinese concept of art is intertwined with the political and social dimension. Instead of going back to Mao's era to find the reasons for such art theory, they associate the two leaders together to suggest a revival of the revolutionary Maoist era.

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<sup>169</sup> Said, 1978, pp. 4-9.

<sup>170</sup> Marks, 2002, pp. 8-9.

<sup>171</sup> Boden, 2016, pp. 129-132.

<sup>172</sup> Phillips, 2015.

<sup>173</sup> Hu J., 2015.

<sup>174</sup> Chin, 2015.

<sup>175</sup> Yang, 2014.

<sup>176</sup> Yang, 2014.

<sup>177</sup> Johnson, 2014.

<sup>178</sup> Johnson, 2013.



The majority of the news tends to depict a distinctively black or white situation, but it is sometimes possible to find a more balanced caption. In the artistic field, now that Xi has given more attention to literature and arts, official artistic institutions are more controlled, but at the same time they can take advantage of their valuable position. In fact, as art should be the means to reach the Chinese renaissance, then official institutions are not only showing their support, but they are also affirming their role and making suggestions. These are not open critiques, as it would not be accepted by the CCP, but they can be read in two different ways: they might sincerely work as advice to improve the system and ease the path towards the Chinese Dream; on the other hand, I think they might hint something more than Xi's favorable criticism<sup>179</sup>. In an article by the "China Culture Daily Art Weekly" (*Meishu wenhua zhoukan* 美术文化周刊), the members of some artistic official institutions gave their ideas about the Chinese artistic sphere<sup>180</sup>. First of all, they did not mention Xi or openly criticize the CCP and the Chinese government; of course, they praised the role of the art and they supported the CCP's vision about literature and art. Nevertheless, they tend to suggest new methods to improve the artistic field. In fact, if the aim of the China Dream is the revival of the nation through a renaissance of Chinese culture, then they suggest investing more in the arts, to give more attention to the content of propaganda and to highly value the correct tradition<sup>181</sup>. Similarly, in an article in "Art China" (*Yishu Zhongguo* 艺术中国), the authors give a comprehensive description of the China Dream and of the artists' role in the society, but also outline some problems that need to be overcome<sup>182</sup>; for instance, the problem of creativity and of art adapting to the times.

As a whole, we can assert that the China Dream is approved by official institutions and is also presented in a favorable light by the press and media. In the West, on the contrary, the tendency is to condemn China rather than analyzing it. Although the prevalent image of China seems to be black or white, sometimes a more balanced description might be found, if reading between the lines.

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<sup>179</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>180</sup> Meishuwenhua, 2016.

<sup>181</sup> Meishuwenhua, 2016.

<sup>182</sup> Li and Deng, 2014, pp. 124-7.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In my conclusion, I would like to summarize the major points argued in my thesis and to answer my research question stated in the introduction, namely what is art theory and how does the CCP conceive of literature and art. My thesis should provide the reader with a descriptive analysis of Xi's art theory. Moreover, it should describe the clear intent of Xi and the CCP to use the arts to achieve the China Dream and their goals. Last, it should also try to reflect on Xi's art theory's relevance and implications in the political and social environments.

### 6.1 Conclusion

Since Xi's election in 2012, there was not only a centralization of power in the political sphere<sup>183</sup>, but much more control in the artistic field as well. At the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art in October 2014<sup>184</sup>, Xi announced the artistic values artists should always bear in mind. Xi's art theory is part of the ideology supporting the China Dream. The art theory is conceived by the Party as a very valuable means to favor the rejuvenation of the nation and the Chinese people. Art, with its expressiveness should put into practice the theoretical guidelines, and subsequently allow people to better visualize the China Dream.

At a first glance, Xi's theory reminded of Mao's art theory in 1942<sup>185</sup>, but a more detailed analysis shows that the two formulations are not very similar. Notwithstanding their differences, there is definitely a reason for a comparison between the two theories: Mao's art theory gives relevance and authority to Xi's. I suggest that the urgency Xi feels for his art theory might stem from the particular circumstances of his term. As a result, I believe his art theory is similar to Mao in the way he exploits art as part of his political plan. In the Chinese context, art is within politics, thus the fact Xi is not only touching upon this issue, but also developing a whole theory about it, should support him. Xi uses art theory as a glue to unify the society and to continue the legitimacy of the Party's rule and relevance. The idea of such instrumental use of art theory seems to be supported by the arguments I have made: Xi is depicted as an educated leader perhaps to better attract intellectuals and artists; Confucianism and moral values are supported in a way that the state is seen as a family member working for the people's sake; and art theory is perceived as necessary for the people and the country.

Regarding its real effectiveness, I believe it is still too early to make any proper statements. There are so many unknowns that we should wait for events to become history and then try to understand

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<sup>183</sup> Hart, 2016, p. 8.

<sup>184</sup> Creemers, 2015.

<sup>185</sup> Mao, 1942, pp. 69-97.

them. We can only speculate about Xi's art theory and its possible results. I believe this theory might be too audacious to be feasible. First of all, it seems it is not applicable to famous artists known around the world. Secondly, the blending of past and new, as well as the combination of Chinese and foreign features, is attractive, but might not come to a synthesis. Moreover, Xi mentions progressive artists, but they do not seem to be in line with the Party's idea of art. Most importantly, the times have changed since Mao's era. Thus, there might be a possibility that the development of such an art theory will not produce the same results as it did in the past.

## 6.2 Implications

My thesis should be helpful to better understand the current Chinese situation through an artistic lens. There are many articles and sources revolving around the China Dream: they explore the political and social spheres, some focusing on the propaganda campaign of the China Dream and the possible revival of a cult of personality. My dissertation, on the other hand, aims at exploring the current political situation through the formulation of art theory. I believe Xi's art theory, supported by both the Party and the Chinese government, is conceived of as necessary because of its political and social implications and the legitimacy it gains from Mao's art theory. In particular, the reference to the past victorious use of ideology is thought to strengthen the continuity of the Party's rule and relevance. For these reasons, Xi is advocating the creation of works of art that can promote social unity, the CCP's power and the faith in Chinese culture as preconditions for the realization of the rejuvenation of the country. This research should emphasize art and the Chinese concept of art within politics. It is important to value this concept as a possible starting point for a more balanced description of China. Instead of criticizing and judging art theory, I believe it would be more important to explore its meaning and ask: is an art theory still relevant in present China? While in Mao's era it was effective and worked as a booster for artists and people, Xi belongs to a completely different era. The channels for artists to gain recognition, thanks to the globalized market, are more than ever; people too have more access to the world and many possibility to get in contact with the non-Chinese environments<sup>186</sup>. Although the only way to really comprehend the current times is for current events to become history, it is still important for scholars to analyze the present and try to give an explanation for it.

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<sup>186</sup> Moore, 2014, 6:22-6:26.

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