

The Silence That Kills

by [Qiyun Gao](#)

During my first couple of days in New York, the sky was grim and heavy rain would pour down without any warning, breaking my umbrella. I spent most of my evenings curled up in bed, left hand holding a cup of tea, right hand gripping a pen. It's been a long time since I wrote something down in Chinese, a language that is now becoming more and more unfamiliar to me.

The unfamiliarity comes not just from disuse, but also from censorship. On Chinese social media, if one wants to say 'politics,' one will type 'ZZ,' which are the initials of the pronunciation of the word 'zheng zhi.' If one wants to talk about immigrating to a new country, instead of expressing it directly, one has to use the character 潤 which has a similar pronunciation to the English word 'run.' Any post, any account, can be taken down or banned if they contain topics deemed sensitive by the government. Recent victims of this are World Health Organization chief Tedros Ghebreyesus as well as Wang Sicong, a famous Chinese billionaire with over forty million followers. Their accounts on *Weibo*, a popular Chinese social platform, were both permanently banned because they criticized China's COVID-19 rules (Gan; Yip).

In China, the Chinese I speak has to be twisted, spliced, and edited; the Chinese I write can be easily banned, deleted, and forgotten; and the Chinese I see is already censored, crushed, and sugar-coated. I almost forget how the language is supposed to look and sound. That evening in New York, I realized how much I missed writing – really writing – in Chinese. The sputtering sound of the pen and the intricate characters on the paper brought me back to my family, my home. I reconnected with the language and culture again, like two lost best friends. Also on that day, a friend invited me to see a movie with her – a Chinese LGBT movie that was banned from screening in China but was showing here at a small theater in Manhattan, ten years after it first came out. "Isn't it sad," I wrote in my notebook that night, "that I am able to watch more films in Chinese, write more freely in Chinese, be more of myself in Chinese, here, in a city six thousand miles away from the place I used to call home. In that place, everyone is speaking *in* Chinese, but no one is speaking Chinese."

Back home, censorship is the elephant in the room. People's lives are saturated by it. Recently, the American TV series *Friends* had scenes removed by Chinese streaming services. While each service's edit is slightly different, they all cut the scene where Ross

tells his parents his ex-wife is lesbian. This raised some furious voices within the country, complaining that “the alterations reinforced gender stereotypes” (Stevenson). But this is not the only incident. The scene where Freddie Mercury comes out to his fiancée in *Bohemian Rhapsody* was also cut, and the final scene of the movie *Fight Club* was even replaced: the police end up saving the building (Stevenson). While public outcry got the original ending of *Fight Club* restored, this type of censorship is so common that many people have grown numb. The other day I was telling a friend from high school that one of my NYU professors had designed some really cool concert visuals for the band MGMT. We grew a tad nostalgic and decided to listen to some of their big hits. Quickly we found out that the song “Time to Pretend” had been banned on Chinese streaming services. My friend rolled his eyes: “I guess that it is what it is.” We both laughed. There was no need to pretend to be surprised or to ask the reason it got censored. The permutations are endless: maybe the lyrics contain messages that go against government propaganda, or one of the band members said something that contradicted what the leaders want people to believe, or the song was involved in a sensitive event in China

Under such harsh censorship, many Chinese people, including artists, choose to stay silent and participate in self-censorship. ‘Getting by’ is the mentality for many Chinese citizens; some even kowtow to the higher-ups. People sacrifice their own freedom for minor practical benefits. For some, however, the stakes are higher. For instance, a young Tibetan singer recently died after immolating himself in front of the Potala Palace, as a way to protest against the oppression of the Tibetan people by the Chinese government. His name was Tsewang Norbu. He had competed in several Chinese singing reality shows and placed highly. On February 24, 2022, one day before he set himself on fire, he released a new single called “If You Have Regrets, Don’t Let Them Go In Secret,” and posted a final note: “After the regrets, it is about letting go. I hope that if you have regrets, don’t let them go in secret” (qtd. in Dolma). The government swept his death under the rug, and people could not talk openly about it on social media. One person posted on *Weibo* on March 4, 2022: “Kind and gentle boy, may you pursue the music you love most in another world. After freeing yourself and no more pain, I hope, Love you.” In the comment section, someone asked what happened: the poster responded, “‘here no convenience to say’” (qtd. in Dolma).

Norbu is not the only prominent young artist in China in recent years who has chosen to end their life in similar circumstances. Hu Bo, the director of the film *An Elephant Sitting Still*, committed suicide at age twenty-nine just before the first screening of his film at the 68th Berlin International Film Festival (Ehrlich). The reasons for these tragedies can be complicated, but the oppression of free expression and political despair are major triggers. Perhaps death is a way for them to speak against the government and set themselves free.

An Elephant Sitting Still is a four-hour movie set in a small city in Northern China called Manzhouli. The camera follows four characters as they slowly go through a single day, looking for an imaginary elephant that, according to the news, sits still and simply ignores the world. This film is political without explicitly commenting on specific social issues, reflecting the mental state of the majority lower-middle-class population in China. Two of the leads are young adults; the others are a thirty-year-old man and an elderly man. Life for them is stifling and depressing: lying to close friends and being lied to in turn, being told by a teacher that you have no future, being forced into a nursing home by your own children, etc. As one nameless character sums up, “The world is a wasteland” (00:34:13-00:34:22).

The film was nominated for and received awards from many renowned festivals, like the Berlin International Film Festival and the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival. It has been ranked among the top movies of 2018/2019 by *Cinema Scope*, *Film Comment*, and other publications. However, Hu Bo never got a chance to witness his success. Perhaps he put too much of himself into the film. Capturing an often neglected reality of economic hardship that the Chinese government refuses to acknowledge, it almost seems as if the film’s protest against Chinese propaganda is more powerful in light of his death.

People will find ways to make their voices heard despite the censorship of the government. In April of 2022, a sudden COVID-19 outbreak took over Shanghai. More than twenty-five million residents were forced to lock down at home, and they faced a severe shortage of food and medical care. Though they were trapped in their bedrooms for two months or more, censorship on social media sought to prevent people from complaining and asking for help. The people outside of Shanghai also found it difficult to access trustworthy sources when the media and news outlets were filled with propaganda (Lu and Qi). As a response, “Voice of April” was born. A six-minute video that briefly circulated online during this time, “Voice of April” is a collection of audio snippets of government announcements and voice memos of residents who suffered under the strict rules. Although this video soon was taken down from Chinese social media, people found ways to escape the censorship. They distorted the video, made a QR code of it, put the video upside down, and even made an NFT out of it, so theoretically no one could delete it from the web (Lu and Qi).

Due to the persistence of censorship, many Chinese artists have also had to flee or been forced into exile. Still, they too continue to speak out, and Ai Weiwei is emblematic of the many dissident artists who continue to create art addressing human rights issues, both in China and outside, despite the consequences. In 2008 after the devastating Sichuan earthquake, Ai formed a team to investigate the real number of child casualties in the earthquake – a number much larger than what the government was stating – and used his blog to honor those children. A year later, he created an art show in Munich

titled *Remembering*, in which he covered a long wall with a large quotation from the desperate mother of one lost child: "All I want is to let the world remember she had been living happily for seven years" ("Artwork"). Ai's blog was soon taken down after this. Then, Ai and his team were sent to the police multiple times both during and after the investigation and were nearly beaten to death (Branigan). His exhibitions in Beijing and Shanghai were canceled by organizations in fear of offending the government (Ramzy). He ended up leaving the country and went into exile. While abroad, he has kept using his art as a weapon to advocate for human rights. In an essay he wrote in *The New York Times*, Ai explains his resistance:

The censorship in China places limits on knowledge and values, which is the key to imposing ideological slavery. I do what I can to show cruelties, the subtle and the not so subtle. As things are here today, rational resistance can be based only on the small actions of individual people. Where I fail, the responsibility is mine alone, but the rights I seek to defend are ones that can be shared. Ideological slaves, too, can revolt. In the end, they always do ("Censorship").

Ai urges people to act up and drop the nonchalant, 'getting by' attitude. Silence can kill.

Mary Schmidt Campbell states in her lecture "The Role of the Arts in a Time of Crisis" that "None of us is naive enough to believe that 'a poem or play or song' can cure anything. Yet I worry. I worry that [Americans] have lost a sense of the potency of what we do as artists and intellectuals." Even though she is talking about Americans, her words are a reminder for people all over the world. There is only so much artists can do, but those small actions can make a difference. The rebellious spirits of artists like Hu Bo and Ai Weiwei inspired me to write this essay and will surely influence more people to stand up and act up. There is a famous Chinese proverb: a single spark can start a prairie fire.

The result of resistance—both artistic and what Ai calls 'rational'—may not be immediate and can be disappointing at times. Censorship is still rampant in China despite more and more people facing this issue and developing the courage to speak up. Many efforts die in vain; many works are destroyed before they can be shown to anyone. It is a long fight and success is not guaranteed. Behind the brave images they project and the work they create, dissident artists are real, vulnerable individuals who are subjected to harm by the police and who have doubts and fears like everyone else. People forget that these artists did not necessarily choose to make political art, but felt that they had to. They need support from audiences and organizations sympathetic to their work and struggles. Sometimes during the process of writing this essay, I wished I hadn't picked a topic so heavy and painful to write about; I wish I was writing about *Peppa Pig* and how much my little sister loves the show, but I know what is more important to me. For

people from China, politics is something we cannot escape, so we make artwork about it. We are not going to cave in. Voices can be censored, but people's minds, people's creativity, can never be caged.

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