Contemporary Art with Chinese Characteristics: Relations between Beijing Artists and the Chinese Government Post-1989

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—Jennifer Lindsay (Editor: Avery Normandin)

China is known in the West for its repression of individual expression, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-71) under Mao Zedong. Mao died in 1976, and by 1989 his successor Deng Xiaoping had been cautiously moving toward greater openness. That year, a landmark exhibit of contemporary art, work which had existed underground since at least the 1970s but had not been publicly shown, took place at the National Museum near Tiananmen Square in Beijing. This was the first acknowledgment of “unofficial” art (works not created for the government) in the Communist Party’s history. This exhibit, “China/avant-garde,” was hailed as a turning point for China.

However, celebration was short lived as the Tiananmen Square Incident occurred mere months after the exhibition. This massive protest and occupation of the Square, which the international community watched with rapt attention, was an enormous embarrassment for Deng. After six weeks without a solution, Deng ordered the military to evacuate the Square, and the incident turned bloody. At least several hundred civilians, perhaps thousands, died. This sent a shocking message to the people of China and the world that Deng would not tolerate outright opposition to the Communist Party’s rule.

In the aftermath of Tiananmen, the government began a crackdown and scaled back many of the Chinese people’s newfound freedoms. Artists especially felt the blow. Forced back underground, they faced tougher restrictions as to what they could depict and exhibit.

Over twenty years later in 2011, Ai Weiwei, China's most internationally known artist, was arrested at Beijing Capital International Airport. He had created several works critical of the Chinese government which had met with great acclaim abroad. His arrest sparked a furious outpouring of support from the international art community. He was released three months later but prohibited from leaving the city.

I returned to Beijing, the cultural and political heart of China, in the summer of 2013 seeking answers to the
questions: How had official censorship of the arts and the treatment of Chinese artists changed since 1989? Had artists regained any of the freedom they lost in the wake of the Tiananmen Square Incident? I had hopes of drawing on the experience to inform my own art as well.

Taipei to Durham to Beijing

I am an art and international affairs dual major with an Asian studies minor, but art is what I initially set out to study in college. I had studied Chinese in school while living in Taiwan as a child, and since then I have felt a strong connection to the culture. I also kept up with China in the news. In particular, I closely followed Ai Weiwei because I was struck by his courage and his use of art as a medium to speak out against government corruption. During fall semester, 2011, I studied in Beijing where I became interested in twenty-first-century creative freedom and repression in the People's Republic of China through a course taught by Dr. David Moser of CET Academic Programs. In order to explore this subject further during summer 2013, I successfully applied to the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for a grant from the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP), with Dr. Moser and Dr. Lawrence Reardon of the University of New Hampshire as my mentors.

Research for my grant proposal turned up very little information on censorship that seemed to come directly from Chinese artists themselves. Therefore, I designed a project in which I would interview as many artists, critics, and curators of varying ages and backgrounds as I could in a nine-week period in Beijing. It wouldn't be a large enough sample for any definitive conclusions, but hopefully it would be enough to give an idea of the current state of censorship that artists face.

In Beijing I lived as an artist in residence in a studio apartment, part of a large complex rented by Red Gate Gallery, which in turn rents to international artists, in the village of Feijiacun on the outskirts of Beijing. The downstairs floor contained ample workspace, a small kitchen, and living room furniture, all in a large open area, with a small bedroom upstairs.

I travelled around Feijiacun by bike and took the subway into the city. I used taxis to access other studio communities that were far from public transport. Although I had studied Chinese at UNH, I wasn't fluent enough to conduct interviews myself, so I hired three different interpreters to help me. They turned out to be an invaluable help in finding people in the art world to talk to and in my learning how to conduct an interview in China. They added much to my knowledge of Chinese culture and history.

Interviewing in China

Doing any sort of business in China requires guanxi, best translated as personal connections, and the line between personal and professional connections is less concrete than in the West. In order to find subjects to interview, I needed to be introduced. Other residents of Red Gate and the gallery itself helped by providing contact information, but most importantly, I had a previous connection with an artist in the city who introduced me to a local gallery owner. This started a chain of introductions, and soon contacts overlapped, which strengthened my credibility with
new contacts. I had established guanxiwang, a network of connections.

A pattern emerged in which artists I interviewed who felt they could trust me and that my project had merit would recommend me to others they knew, usually their peers. Through this network of connections, I interviewed a sizable group of prominent members of the art community. When the opportunity arose, I strengthened my guanxiwang by assisting my subjects with tasks such as filling out an American visa application. I learned that showing an interest in the subject’s own work would be more likely to result in a successful interview. Even though subjects were aware that they would not be named, some became offended or at least less helpful, when I neglected to ask about their work and career—even when our time was short.

At the outset I was primarily interested in talking with independent visual artists, such as photographers, painters, sculptors, and installation artists who made art with social or political commentary. They would be working artists who made a significant portion of their income through selling their work. I was also interested in interviewing gallery owners or curators if I could gain access to them. However, given time constraints, I welcomed the opinions of other artists. This turned out to give me a more comprehensive view of the artistic community.

Who I Interviewed and What They Taught Me

In the end I interviewed twenty-three subjects: one critic, four contemporary art professors, seventeen artists, and one who was both an artist and critic. Of these, seventeen were men and six were women. I interviewed eighteen people over forty (predominantly in their fifties and sixties) and five people under forty (predominantly in their twenties and thirties). Of the artists, sixteen were contemporary, and one was traditional. The women were exclusively artists, including the one traditional. All four university professors were male; one was in the painting department, two in sculpture, and one in experimental art. Eleven of my subjects were prominent in the Chinese art world.

I had written the initial interview questions assuming subjects would be very guarded and so did not include any specific questions about creative freedom. I was surprised to discover most of those I spoke with were more open to the subject than I had expected. The single largest factor that determined their openness was their position relative to "the system," the government and Chinese Communist Party. To be “in” or “out” of the system were unofficial but generally accepted categories. Those considered “in the system” relied on staying in good favor with the government for their living and career, which meant they could not be openly critical of Party policies. In this group were most university faculty, since nearly all universities are government supported; museum curators and gallery owners who wanted to stay in business; art critics who wanted their reviews to be published uncensored; and artists who wanted to receive commissions from the government. They tended to be less open with me when discussing creative freedom in China and less critical of the system.
Those “outside the system,” or “independent artists,” as I have labeled them for this project, were not as dependent on cooperating with the government for their livelihood and were more open in expressing their opinions, even critical, in interviews. Everyone in China, however, is aware of the government’s influence, and it was impossible for me to accurately gauge my subjects’ candor.

The central question in my interviews was, “Is China freer now for artists than it was in the 1980s preceding Tiananmen?” Responses varied widely, from “Yes, it’s absolutely freer,” to “No, there has been no substantial change whatsoever.”

Those in the system—the four art professors and one critic—generally believed China had become significantly more open in recent years. However, I had to be careful about how I broached the issue of China’s openness with them. I once asked the question “How do you feel the environment for artists has changed in the past twenty-five years or so?” My subject responded suspiciously, “Why twenty-five years?” I backtracked and said that it was an arbitrary number, that I just wanted some historical perspective, and he relaxed somewhat.

Most artists outside the system whose work didn't challenge censorship admitted there are still restrictions. However, they did not seem particularly concerned as these restrictions did not affect them. Among all independent artists, most of the younger ones expressed this same opinion. They had grown up within the current climate of censorship and had not experienced Tiananmen Square or the climate of persecution during the Cultural Revolution. The majority of artists who openly defied censorship were middle-aged or older. One in particular gravely told me lurid accounts of state brutality during and after Tiananmen; he made paintings depicting violence against protestors. His assessment of the current state of creative freedom was that no real progress had been made since 1989, and that the situation may actually have worsened. It seems plausible that younger artists would be less interested in defying censorship because they did not experience the height of government repression, though this was not universally true, as one young artist I interviewed had assisted Ai Weiwei in concealing controversial works in order to smuggle them through customs.

The Red Line and Dodging the Censors

My interviews indicated that in some subject areas there was more freedom for artists. Nudity and sexuality are now both more acceptable to an extent, and it’s possible to make work that is critical of society and the government as long as it doesn't cross the “red line.” Several artists discussed the “red line,” the unspoken but clearly understood boundary between subject matter that can and cannot be openly discussed or depicted in art. Prohibited subjects include those mocking Party leadership, such as referring to then Premier Wen Jiabao's family's enormous wealth or depicting Mao in an irreverent way. Contrary to popular belief, Mao is not a sacred cow. The Communist Party has openly acknowledged that he was only “70% correct” in his policy, and Mao is a common theme in Chinese contemporary art to the point of cliché. However, there are limits, and these are clearly understood. An artist knowingly decides to respect or cross the line.

Some contemporary works of art publicly exhibited come very close but do not cross the “red line.” The six part work exhibited in the Red Gate Gallery this past summer draws its images from Beijing life and history. (See Fig. 1) Their juxtaposition could imply criticism of specific events and people. Mao Zedong’s head, lower right, is below a tank whose gun is pointed at Tiananmen Square, recalling the tanks brought in to subdue the protestors in the Square. Top left and next to the image of the Square is an image of Lei Feng, a hero of the Chinese Communist Party. His position could imply a connection to the violent events in the Square.
Figure 2 shows a large image of Lei Feng, held up as a model citizen in Communist Party propaganda. In recent years, Lei Feng’s image has been used against the Party to criticize it for failing to live up to the moral standards he represents. This piece seems to do just that as close inspection reveals the background of the image to be composed of Playboy covers. This piece was also exhibited at Red Gate Gallery during my stay in Beijing.

I found that some artists and even some university professors had devised truly fascinating ways to cross the “red line” and still evade censorship. Two professors at a prestigious art school, in charge of a student exhibition, were concerned about one piece in particular: an artistic rendering of obscene drawings taken from public bathroom stalls. The professors wanted to show the piece but worried that the entire exhibition might be shut down if the piece provoked government censors, which is not uncommon. In some cases the censors will simply ask that the piece be removed, but in others the entire exhibition will be closed. This is particularly a problem with group exhibitions because every participant can suffer from one artist’s transgression. Since interpersonal relationships are very important in China, there is social pressure on artists not to push the boundaries too much.

In order to exhibit the piece safely, the professors put small panels over the “sensitive parts,” which obscured them from view from a frontal angle; however, when viewed from the side, the entire image was revealed. Their rationale was that the censors don’t care enough to examine the piece thoroughly, so a superficial cover-up would suffice. I was surprised to see defiance like this from two high-level professors at a major Chinese art school. This view of government censors and the tactic to evade them are not limited to works of art and occur in all aspects of Chinese life on the mainland.

Others hold the same view of the censors. One of the artists who assisted Ai Weiwei in co-curating an exhibit abroad evaded the censors by gluing a rendering of an innocuous, centuries-old poem on top of a subversive piece and changing the title under which he submitted it. He knew the censors in charge of evaluating art to be exported wouldn’t examine it closely enough to uncover the facade, and it arrived at its destination unchallenged.
Another artist showed me a bronze sculpture titled “Mao’s Guilt,” depicting Mao Zedong kneeling and looking extremely apologetic. The two artists’ father had died in custody after being labeled an enemy of the state during the Cultural Revolution. This piece crosses the “red line” to such an extent that the head is removable and stored separately in order to keep from provoking the censors. Despite this precaution, the owner of the factory where the sculpture was cast was caught and forced to spend four months in prison. The artists responsible offered to help the owner’s family, but they wanted nothing more to do with the artists or the sculpture.

Evaluating the Interviews and Making my own Art

Although it was difficult, as mentioned before, to evaluate accurately how candid my subjects were being, I have tentatively concluded that in some ways artists in China today are freer from censorship than during the period following the Tiananmen incident in 1989. Some subjects in the forbidden territory beyond the “red line” have now been deemed acceptable. It doesn’t seem unusual that my interview subjects’ degree of openness and kind of opinion varied depending on their relationship to the “system” and their age. The question of censorship, however, needs to be put in context. Generally speaking, the Chinese have a higher faith in authority figures than do Americans; consequently, they believe that their leaders’ decisions to shield them from negative influence by censoring the media are in their best interests. Therefore, governmental censorship is of a lesser concern for citizens of China than it is for citizens of the United States.

Part of my summer’s research project was to see if my interviewing experience would have an effect on my own art work. In my Red Gate studio I was able to begin some pieces, and I’m most excited about a series of portrait heads of artists done on newspaper using traditional Chinese paints and inks. These were informed by the work of a street artist called Swoon; street art largely isn’t allowed in China. This series was my reaction to the incredible stories of defiant artists who had lost their studios or created work that had gotten them into serious trouble with the government. On the faces of the artists I painted 拆 (“demolish,” pronounced “chai”) in red, the symbol spray painted on buildings slated for demolition, which had become ubiquitous during the recent massive urban building boom. (See Fig. 3)

I am truly grateful to everyone who enabled me to have this adventure. To my donors via the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research—Dana Hamel, Craig and Andrea Abbott, and Frank and Patricia Noonan— for believing in students like me; to my excellent mentors, Drs. Lawrence Reardon and David Moser, who encouraged me at every
step and gave me the cultural and historical knowledge necessary to design the project and thrive in Beijing; to my spectacular project assistant, Lucie Zhang, who went above and beyond her role as interpreter and without whom this project would not have been nearly so successful; to Brian Wallace and Zehui Tang of Red Gate Gallery for connecting me with invaluable resources in Beijing; to my fellow artists-in-residence at Red Gate, who encouraged me and kept my spirits up during challenging moments; to Shawne Hui and Shirley Fan, cheerful and professional interpreters; to the endlessly patient and supportive Georgeann Murphy and the rest of the Hamel Center staff; and to John, Matte, Sarah, and my parents for their bottomless love and support, particularly the latter for entertaining my every creative impulse through the years and always encouraging me to reach for the stars.

Author and Mentor Bios

Senior Jennifer Lindsay is more than comfortable traversing the globe. She is a Pembroke, New Hampshire, native; however, after spending several childhood years with her family in Taiwan, Jen has always felt deeply connected to Chinese culture. A member of the University Honors Program, she majors in both international affairs and studio art with a minor in Asian studies. She will graduate in May with a bachelor of arts in studio art and international affairs. An International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) grant from the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research supported her summer research into censorship of artistic expression in China. Her goal was to help Americans better understand the intricacies of Chinese culture. Jen, a talented artist herself, prefers oil painting, citing figures and portraits as her favorite subjects. She is also an avid thespian, taking part in UNH’s social change improv group WildACTS since freshman year, in addition to other theatrical groups. In the future, Jen plans to pursue studies in art and international relations, perhaps continuing her research in academia or working in curating and program development.

Lawrence C. Reardon is an associate professor of political science and coordinator of the Asian studies minor at the University of New Hampshire. A frequent mentor, Dr. Reardon stated that “Jennifer developed a comprehensive research proposal that was based on extensive connections and a sophisticated understanding gained during two years of preliminary field work in Beijing.” He marveled at the way Jennifer uncovered the difficulties faced by contemporary artists, who must balance the sometimes contentious relationship between the artistic community and the state. “Jennifer interviewed not only those artists who work within the state-sponsored system, but also the independent artists, who must depend on the marketplace to earn a living. Jennifer’s interviews demonstrated the increased freedom of expression within China, but also demonstrated its boundaries.” Dr. Reardon has taught at UNH since 1991, and specializes in Asian studies, international relations, and international political economy.

Dr. Reardon has mentored Inquiry authors Susannah Pratt (2007) and Laura Smetana (2007.)

Dr. David Moser is academic director of CET Beijing Chinese Studies at Beijing Capital Normal University and specializes in Chinese linguistics and philosophy. He has lived in Beijing for twenty-five years. For his class in the fall of 2011 Jennifer researched the Chinese art scene, and he arranged an internship for her at the Beijing 798 Arts District. Dr. Moser became the foreign mentor for her IROP project, providing contacts and arrangements for interviews as well as helping her find translation help. “She did an outstanding job on her project,” he said. This was a first mentoring experience for Dr. Moser, and he found it “a very gratifying experience.”