The invisible red line  
– maneuvering Chinese art censorship

Art can both reflect and shape reality. It is the fear of this power to amplify and produce meaning which inspires censorship. In their quest for freedom of expression, Chinese artists have had to face a variety of censorship strategies. Some are rooted in politics, while others hold to conservative moral and aesthetic codes. This paper refers to specific art works, artists and exhibitions, discussing how the current threshold of acceptability is being challenged by Chinese artists.

BY SI HAN • OCTOBER 2012

On 27 September 1979, a group of young artists hung up their works on the fences of a park right outside the National Art Gallery in Beijing. The styles of the paintings and sculptures were varied, mostly influenced by the Western modernism – which was artistically forbidden and political incorrect during most of the time since the new China was established thirty years ago. None of the participants were accepted as an artist at that time; they were all amateurs who enjoyed creating art but did not belong to the official system – government supported artists with salaries and art institutions behind them, the ones who were setting the norms of aesthetic codes and standards of art.

Two days later, the exhibition, scheduled for a whole week, was forced to close down. The artists and their supporters, however, refused to accept their fate and organized a demonstration. From the few black and white photographs which survived till today, we can see one documenting the sculptor Wang Keping holding a placard with five characters written in ink: Want art freedom. ([thestarsart.com](http://thestarsart.com))

This is the first time in the modern history of Chinese art that the quest of freedom of art was clearly stated and shouted out aloud.

The demonstration led to fruitful results, due to the organisers’ skilful negotiation with the government. During the following three years, this group of artists were allowed to exhibit their works a few times within the walls of China’s most important official art institution, until the group was disbanded and several of the key members went abroad, among others Ai Weiwei, who later became famous as an artist and human rights fighter.

This group of artists were called “Stars Group”. Several of the key members were also involved in the Democracy Wall movement around that time. Hence, the first confrontation between Chinese artists and the state since the beginning of the People's Republic obtained a political colour and dimension. The name of this group, “Stars”, can be
seen a metaphor. When the Sun goes down, that’s when we all turn to the stars. The Sun refers to Mao who had died three years earlier. The Stars are the artists who started the struggle for their individual rights to hear, to see, and to speak – as Wang Keping’s “Silence” tries to express. (shigebao.com)

Demonstration is one way to fight against censorship of art. The Stars exhibition is a brave, however a rare example. At that time, no one could foresee what the Chinese art scene would become in the following three decades.

Three restrictions of art: political, moral and aesthetic codes
In February 1989, ten years after the Stars Exhibition, another controversial and groundbreaking show titled “China/Avant-Garde” took place in the National Art Gallery in Beijing (artasiapacific.com). It basically covered the whole Chinese modern art movement during the 1980s across the whole country, with performance, installation, political pop art, and experimental wash and ink. Many of the works were provocative and dramatically different from the traditional aesthetics of social realism, propaganda art or traditional ink and wash painting.

However, this exhibition, scheduled for two weeks, was also short-lived and closed on the same day it was opened. The direct reason was a piece of performance art by Xiao Lu, when she with a handgun shot at her own work called “Dialogue”.

It took a year for the committee led by the curator Gao Minglu before they reached an agreement on the exhibition with the gallery and the official culture institutions behind it. As revealed in an internal document many years later, the show was allowed under the following three conditions:

1. It is not allowed to exhibit works being against the Party and the Four Cardinal Principles.
2. It is not allowed to exhibit pornographic or obscene works.
3. Performance Art is not allowed.

Gao was not satisfied with these restrictions, especially the third one on performance art. But he compromised and agreed to exhibit performance art represented by still photos. Not all artists obeyed, such as Xiao Lu, one of the 186 artists in the show.

What I am most interested in, for the purpose of this article, is the three conditions raised in the agreement. They actually illustrate three major fields of difficulties which Chinese artists have had to face during the last thirty years, and provide a key to the understanding of the variety of art censorship strategies in China:

• Political censorship of art
• Moral censorship of art
• Aesthetic censorship of art

Political censorship of art
The censorship of political content of art is perhaps what we pay most attention to in the West. The latest example is Ai Weiwei. Even though the initial charge against him is economic crime, it is not hard to guess that it was Ai’s political statements which irritated the government, partly through his works. Two of his photographs were widely circulated in 2011 via the internet. Grass Mud Horse Covering the Middle has a title in Chinese which also phonetically sounds similar to “F*** your mother, the Party Central Committee”, a sentence which in writing would be completely different – this kind of play on words can only be done and understood in Chinese. One Tiger with Eight Breasts (artinfo.com) shows the artist with four women, all of them naked. One plus eight is nine, the netizens interpreted it as the nine members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of CCP. Gao Brothers sculpture of Mao kneeling on the ground with a gesture of confession is another example.

To criticize the party and its leading members, their ideology, and the legal ground for their reign seems to be a clear red line that Ai Weiwei and Gao Brothers have crossed, and thus their works got banned. However, no one from the government has ever been able to give them a clear explanation why such art are improper, since any such
Moral censorship of art

The most frequent censorship of art is rooted in the moral sphere. The naked body, sex, and sexuality are sensitive subjects.

The naked body is a relatively new artistic phenomenon in China. Live model sketch classes began at art academies when the last imperial dynasty had ended, in 1912, but this occurred with great care and amidst much controversy. During the greater part of the Mao era, nudity was forbidden in painting and photography. It was considered too personal, too Western and too pornographic. In the past few decades, Chinese artists have consciously used their nudity to confront taboos of human desires. Nudity does attract the Chinese eyes. Ai Weiwei’s One Tiger with Eight Breasts was once investigated for pornography. Though it was obvious just an excuse, the direct charge holds to the conservative moral codes.

Sex seems to be a topic which Chinese prefer not to talk about, despite the Confucian statement: “sex and food, these are where the greatest human desires exist.” In literature, such as the Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan’s novels, descriptions of sex are nowadays well-accepted. But in art, depiction of sex can be easily accused of being pornographic. Exhibiting, printing or spreading such kind of works can be risky.

The young photographer Ren Hang is one of the daring artists, whose works of naked body and sex acts reminds us of those of Wolfgang Tillmans. No one in Beijing dared to print Ren’s photos.

The fear was that it would be considered as “spreading pornographic material”, a criminal offense in China. He publishes his photos on the website, but whenever he starts a new site it is quite quickly shut down. But once one has been shut down, he immediately starts a new one; it is a game of cat and mouse. The internet plays a decisive part in allowing artists to reach out and find their audience, inside China and beyond.

Sexuality has become a subject which many younger artists have started to touch upon during the last fifteen years. It stems from two important changes in legislation: the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997 and its removal from the list of mental illnesses in 2001. Among the 27 artists I was able to present in the exhibition Secret Love focusing on LGBT-related art, the answers vary when they were asked if such an exhibition would be possible to
show in China. Some of them are sure that it would cause trouble, while others see no problem at all. The suggestion was: just do it. Well, if you never try, you will never know. Beside the methods mentioned previously: demonstration, negotiation, and playing game of cat and mouse, just do it seems to be yet another strategy to manoeuvring Chinese art censorship and cross any imagined or real red line.

**Aesthetic censorship of art**

Aesthetic censorship of art is a field which is often being overlooked. The convention of art itself has also been used as a censorship strategy and may limit the freedom of expression in art.

Before the late 1970s, the dominant aesthetic standard was socialist realism. Impressionism, for example, was seen as bourgeois and not accepted. Artists were not free to choose whatever style they preferred to use or wanted to borrow from the history of western art. Styles of art were an ideological issue. The paintings by Ai Weiwei and many members of the Stars group around 1980s were purely impressionist landscapes, nothing political. The controversy of their art lied in that they challenged the system which had set the formal convention of art.

Xiao Lu’s gunshot which led to the sudden “death” of the China/Avant-Garde exhibition in 1989 shows the difficulties performance art have had in China. In 1995, the famous artist Ma Liuming was arrested when he performed his “Lunch series” in Beijing East Village.

After more than two decades of struggle the Chinese artists finally obtained the formal and stylistic freedom of making art. The growing art market also contributed to this triumph. To what degree new art can be accepted by the official art institutions outside the metropolitans is, however, yet to be seen.

**Film censorship**

A few more lines need to be written about film censorship. Art and film are related, if we consider both as visual culture. But there are special rules for film. The censorship of films is regulated by SARFT – The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. An English translation of the regulation can be found here ([info.hktdc.com](http://info.hktdc.com)). It is important to notice that the term “censorship” (shen cha in Chinese) is used by the Chinese authority. The regulation provides us the clearest answer to the question of where the red lines lies in the film industry. Here, I focus on LGBT-related films.

In Secret Love, I show a few independent documentary films. What I did not take up in the exhibition is the multitude of feature films with gay, lesbian and transsexual people produced in China since 1996. The first gay film was Zhang Yuan’s *East Palace, West Palace*, which was followed by other so-called underground films, but it has not been possible to show them in cinemas or on TV in China. This is also true for other similar films from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West – Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* is also among the films which cannot be shown. You can buy pirate copies or download them from the internet; prohibited material is often popular in China. Nevertheless, a forbidden film loses its potential to reach out and affect a broader audience. Attempts at organising public viewings of these films have been made. One example is the Beijing Queer Film Festival, which is on its fifth round since 2001. The organiser, Yang Yang and her team have met with resistance and difficulties at every the festival time after time.

In the regulation by SARFT, it is stated clearly, among other conditions, that films containing any of the following contents must be cut or altered:

- Showing obscene and vulgar content, exposing scenes of promiscuity, rape, prostitution, sexual acts, perversion, homosexuality, masturbation and private body parts including the male or female genitalia; containing dirty and vulgar dialogues, songs, background music and sound effects

Despite the fact that homosexuality is no longer illegal in China since 1997, films containing such content are not allowed to be shown publicly according to SARFT, the institution which issues the permit for any film to be shown publicly. This is a bizarre situation. The law should be respected and the regulation is not logical even from the point of view of Chinese law – perhaps this is one thing which international efforts such as a conference like this could point finger on and helps to develop a strategy to counter censorship for the film makers in China.
Epilogue
Rapid and radical economic growth has been taking place in China during the past decades, bringing large-scale, pervasive social change. Consciousness of individual rights is increasing, and in this process, traditional conservative approaches and values are also changing. This rapid development is reflected in the visual arts, which in turn can affect the social processes and contribute to the formation of a new, different reality. Political censorship of art is only one of several aspects. Moral and aesthetic codes set more difficulties for the freedom of expression in the visual culture in China. I believe that the increasing awareness of individual rights and respect for human desires will finally change the landscape of art and set it free. In this process, fighters in the front line are needed, but it requires also many, many more to stand behind.

Si Han is a curator of the Chinese collections at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm and he is a guest professor at China Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing. He is the curator of the Secret Love exhibition, which will be opened in the fall 2012 and is the first major exhibition of Chinese contemporary art on the subject of taboo love.

Photos:
Ren Hang, Untitled, Photography, 2008
Poster, Fifth Beijing Queer Film Festival, 2011

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