The Impact of Gender Issues and the Suppression of Artistic Expression in an Autocratic Power Regime

Student Name: Yilan Men

Student Number: 2006394

Programme of Study: Fine Art: Studio, Site & Context

Module: Independent Project (ADAA6000)

Statement:

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons)

University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea, 14th December 2022.

Abstract

This thesis considers the suppression of artistic expression and gender issues as two important concerns that often co-exist under autocracy, and the implications of them, via the research of theories of misogyny and the relation between power and truth, and the exploration of a few representative Chinese artists, along with recent social events took place in China. As art can be a form of resistance and a threat to the authorities, authoritarian leaders often seek to stifle and restrict artistic expression. Women as a marginalised gender, are already disadvantaged by gender inequality, are particularly vulnerable to this repression of creativity. Hence, the survey also investigated at how restricted artistic expression and gender discrimination interact. The stated analysis is to explicate that this suppression not only silences individuals, but also has a negative impact on society as a whole, as it limits the diversity of ideas and perspectives.

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Introduction

In China, the social environment shows disdain for human rights, especially women's rights, and that gender issues in public spaces are becoming more and more intense. At the same time, the interference of power in the field of literary and artistic creation directly affects the creative space of artists, not to mention the double impact that women artists suffer under this circumstance. Furthermore, I have found that there is no shortage of academic research on Chinese art, Chinese gender issues, and Chinese politics, but there is a lack of research on all three combined. Thus, based on the current state of affairs, I have chosen the topic of how gender issues are fostered, and artistic expression is constricted in an authoritarian structure of power for my research, and I will discuss the impact of these issues on the individual artist and the artistic community and industry.

I believe that the lack of freedom of expression and the oppressed creative space, as well as the double suppression of women, both result from the gendered and centralized power structure in China. To substantiate this argument, the content of this thesis has increased the length of the discussion of the societal context in China compared to the time when the Annotated Bibliography was written, due to the recent outbreak of protests and marches. In order to better construe the underlying context of the research, the analysis in the first chapter will focus on misogyny, feminism, and the Chinese social

environment along with the supporting theories of Ueno Chizuko, Kate Manne, and Michel Foucault. In addition, there will be a demonstration of examples of Chinese social events to convey the viewpoints more clearly. Then in the second chapter, there will be an investigation of the backlash against *Nomadland* in China to explain China's restricted space for literary and artistic creation, and a few other Chinese artists, notably, Xiang Jing, Hung Liu, Badiucao, and Ai Weiwei, and their works will be discussed mainly through journalistic and interview materials.

Chapter 1 Power Exploits Rights

1.1 Gendered Power Exploits Women's Rights

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 273).

In this part of the chapter, the probe of misogyny will be used as an entry point to gender issues as its presence is within our everyday lives. In a nutshell, misogyny is the hatred and discrimination of women based on their gender. It is a fundamental component of the gender binary system and is firmly ingrained in the core of male self-affirmation, which makes males into sexual objects (Ueno, 2015).

The misogynist would be a more concrete topic for debate than the concept of misogyny itself in order to study how misogyny presents itself in life in a more direct manner. An individual who upholds misogyny is referred to as a misogynist. In addition to discriminating against women, misogynists also aim to keep gays out of society because they are no longer considered to be sexual subjects but rather "feminised" sexual objects (Ueno, 2015). While male homosexuality was one of the targets of sexism, it is also typical for males to have "male homosocial wants" (Sedgwick, 1985), which differ from the former since they are a need to be recognised and acknowledged by their own kind under patriarchal control.

Misogyny appears in many facets of our society. "Loving moms, erasing others" is an instance of misogyny (Manne, 2018) that has been practiced by misogynists in real life. According to Ueno (2015), the social roles of women in patriarchal cultures are those of subordinate to men, and they are instructed to follow the norms and expectations that conduct the social roles. The prescriptive nature of the category of "mother" as a cultural ideal of selflessness and devotion also binds women themselves (Manne, 2018). This explains why "mothers" do not appear to be the target of misogyny at first glance, but "others" who do not fit into this group are legitimately targeted for discrimination by patriarchal ideology. “Others” are often referred to as “prostitutes” or “unwed mothers” because they are not dominated or controlled by a particular man, they are women who “exercise the right to sexual self-determination (Ueno, 2015)”. In fact, the majority of prostitutes and unwed mothers are nothing more than victims of patriarchy, and the offenders frequently place the blame on the victim (Ueno, 2015). Manne's (2018) "Suspecting Victims" provides evidence and support for this tactic.

Another example would be pornography, in which women frequently fall for males due to their excellent sexual prowess, which is understandable given that pornography is a by-product of a culture that predominantly targets men as its primary audience. Men are attracted to such content because "domination through pleasure" is more ideal than "domination through power or fortune"

because the dominated submits voluntarily, which lowers the cost of domination and makes it secure and stable (Ueno, 2015). Due to the imbalance between the subject and the object, it is also a self-righteous fantasy projection that ignores the genuine sentiments of the sexual object in the sexual act.

Women can be misogynistic as well, despite the fact that some of these women may not see it that way, women's misogyny is self-hatred. They accomplish this by portraying themselves among the ladies as special personalities and by shunning women who are not themselves, spreading misogyny in the process. However, this method of making privileged "exceptions" has no negative effects on the mechanism of discrimination and even helps to produce it repeatedly (Ueno, 2015).

Moreover, when the same ideas or deeds are stated or carried out by a female or male counterpart, they could be construed differently in the first place. This is because identical actions might appear to be different because of an unjustified prior mistrust or a gendered task delegation system (Manne, 2018). Since the social majority is the one who establishes and divides categories, all women—whether they desire to perpetuate misogyny or suffer from self-loathing—are the social minority who experience "violence of categories" (Ueno, 2015).

Sexual dominance is an overtly material rule that is upheld by social and economic means; patriarchy is not just psychological dominance and oppression but cannot be isolated from its material basis. The emancipation of women's self-awareness is nevertheless hampered in the social sphere by historical norms and expectations that have existed for centuries; in the economic sphere, women are marginalised in the workforce and their labour is viewed as insignificant (Ueno, 2020).

The above analysis is due to the irreplaceable role of the rise of women empowerment in contemporary art and public thinking, with its contribution to new artistic viewpoints by challenging the gendered vision (Millner & Moore, 2022). And this will be supported by more visual examples in the following, both on a social level and in relation to the art world.

1.2 Centralised Power Exploits Human Rights

> *Repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know* (Foucault, 1984, p. 293).

This part of the chapter aims to set out the general cultural and political context of mainland China, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, by the

presentation of actual examples with the application of Foucault's theory.

At the start of the pandemic, the approximately 11-million-person metropolis of Wuhan, China, where the pandemic began, was locked down during the initial coronavirus outbreak. There were not enough supplies for people to subsist on, nor were there sufficient medical resources to care for so many patients. As a result, many Wuhan residents posted requests for the assistance online, but the government deleted all of those messages in an effort to stop fear or rumours. The person who starved to death while under home quarantine and the one who jumped from a bridge because they had no access to medical care and were afraid of infecting their families were both in difficult situations. The posts that detailed these actual incidents were removed because we needed to have a "correct collective memory" (China Economy Net, 2020).

Xi Jinping's zero-Covid approach has led to strict epidemic control and violated people's basic rights, which involves mass testing and quarantine, rapid lockdowns. For example, everyone is forced to register a "health code", which is categorised by colour: red for close contact with a confirmed case, yellow for possible contact with a case, and green for "healthy". The status of the "health code" directly affects access to public places, while those with a "non-healthy" status must go to a hospital for a PCR test, or even be taken to government-built isolation sites for quarantine. Over time, these harsh tactics brought about

serious discontent among the people. In late November this year, protest marches broke out in several major Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Wuhan. The unusually large-scale protests started when a fire in the city of Urumqi claimed ten lives (Allen, 2022), which most people believed it is the responsibility of the government. This is because Urumqi was in lockdown from August to November and the local government chose to directly seal the entry doors of every household in residential buildings in order to implement Xi's policy more assertively. Thus, when a fire broke out, residents had no escape, and the cars blocked the road for the emergency services to arrive because no one could come and move the cars. Not only that, but in the official briefing after the fire, the spokesperson even claimed that the accident was partly due to "the low self-rescue capacity of some residents".

Figure 1. *Workers removing the road sign from protest site*, 2022

However, while the news was being trumpeted on Western media platforms, the Chinese media remained silent, even ensuring that more people were not informed of the protests by banning keywords, and the list of prohibited words is still growing. Not only that the terms of the cites where protests took place

were censored, but also new terms like “white paper” which refers to a symbol of protests (Allen, 2022). This is a vivid proof that the voices of the oppressed are therefore rarely heard, and "truth" exists in a "circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it" (Foucault, 1984).

And in an atmosphere where the authorities are in full denial about the mistakes of their own decisions and where freedom of expression is not allowed, the power structure does not allow any kind of search for the truth, which also leads directly to an acute limitation of the subject matter of literary and artistic creation as art has a distinctive voice in fighting against autocracy. It provides a gateway for rebellion, political awareness, and unity among alliance makers (Ewing, 2017).

1.3 Dual Exploitation

Under the gendered and centralised power structure in China, the oppression of women is twofold. In order to present this repression in the most intuitive way, this section will include references to two of several high-profile cases of gender-based crimes in the year 2022.

Earlier this February, a video went viral on Chinese social media platforms. In this video, a middle-aged woman is shown with chains around her neck, bolted to a wall (Wang & Dong, 2022), and she herself shows obvious mental

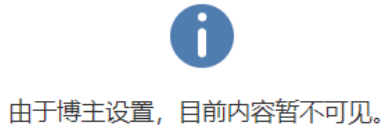

Figure 2. *Hu's original post was blocked,* 2022

abnormalities. The video's accompanying text reveals that she has eight children, but this has stirred up confusion and rage on the internet. The local authorities had no response to this until the anger grew to the point where they had to react, but their briefing tried to obfuscate the point of the woman's inhumane treatment, fuelling public anger even more. Hu Xijin, the former editor of Global Times, a state-controlled tabloid, questioned that it should be illegal to forcefully have eight children with a mentally ill person and treat her as a reproductive tool. Then, the local authorities released a longer follow-up statement in which they stated they were looking into Ms. Yang's husband for imprisoning her. They purposefully avoided addressing the question of whether she was coerced into having children (Wang & Dong, 2022). Since the bride trafficking industry has been rife for the past few decades, many people question the legitimacy of the new statement's claim that Ms. Yang had not been trafficked. Nevertheless, despite all the attention the incident has received, no further information has been made public and posts related to it have been removed from social media platforms and keywords have been banned.

Before the fallout from the above incident had fully subsided on the internet, especially among the female group, a serious case of violence against four

women took place in mid-June. At 3 am in a Tangshan barbecue restaurant, a man became enraged when his advances at a woman were rejected, and he and his accomplice committed violence against the woman and her friend. The police did not respond until 15 hours after the violence was reported, which is unusually long compared to the usual response time. The gruesome attack's security camera footage quickly went viral online and has remained the main topic of discussion in the following weeks. Women's fury and horror at the looming menace of sexual violence in everyday life have inundated social media. More than 4.8 billion people have viewed only three of the several linked hashtags on the Weibo site, which is approximately China’s version of Twitter (i.e., with similar functionalities, but the state can control the flow of information). Also, many fumed about the fact that the authorities could locate probable coronavirus patients right away yet did not show up willing to use the same resources to protect women. State-run media outlets emphasised the potential for gang violence to evade the nature of gender as a key factor in this case. Weibo removed hundreds of profiles after charging that they had incited "gender opposition" (Wang, 2022). This is a term unique to Chinese public discourse and is often used by advocates of gender dysphoria in situations where women are speaking out for their rights. As gender equality is one of the fundamental state policies proclaimed by the Chinese government, the term is also used to label feminism as a provocation to the government. A common accusation against feminism and feminists that accompanies this term is

"colluding with foreign forces to endanger the social stability of the country".

While the awakening of female consciousness among the people, especially women of my generation, is unstoppable, the authorities refuse to accept the fact, respect our will, and continue to shift the focus of the conversation and dilute the narrative from a gender perspective – the discussions were all cut short to downplay the ways in which women had been mistreated. Women's rights are a contentious topic in China right now since the country's top leader, Xi Jinping, wants more women to adopt conventional gender roles and have more children in order to help with the country's impending demographic issue. Women who challenge or contest the authority of the party by bringing up gender disparity are viewed as reactionaries in collusion with forces outside the country (Stevenson & Wang, 2022).

The seriousness of this issue is not only reflected in social events, but also in a recent break with nearly 20 years of political tradition: there is not a single woman in the new Politburo of the Communist Party of China. Some women's problems are likely to continue to be perceived as a direct threat to the party leadership due to the lack of women in government. Over the past few years, there has been a rapid upsurge in feminist discourse and sympathy for sexual assault victims that have been quickly put out of commission (Stevenson, 2022) by the interference of censorship, as mentioned in the examples above, and

even the use of police forces at times to arrest people who try to speak out.

It is a direct signal that the government has no interest in improving women's rights and feminist activism remains a war that is exclusively female, unsupported, and even suppressed by the power of the authorities. In this monolithic political environment, neither individual artists nor the art community as a whole is able to break the shackles of unfettered speech and question or criticise the government in the role that art should play when facing societal challenges.

Chapter 2 An Art Community that is not Allowed to Have a Different Voice

2.1 The Vanished *Nomadland* and the Constantly Constricted Space

> *The regime of truth is not merely ideological or superstructural; it was a condition of the formation and development of capitalism. And it's this same regime which, subject to certain modifications, operates in the socialist countries* (Foucault, 1984, p. 74).

根据相关法律法规和政策
搜索结果未予显示
请尝试其他查询词

Figure 3. *According to the relevant laws, regulations and policies, the search results are not displayed, please try other search terms,* 2022.

This regime of truth manifests itself in China in the form of rigorous censorship. In the following, I will illustrate this point using the case of Chloé Zhao and her award-winning film *Nomadland* (2020).

Chinese state medias were ecstatic when Chloé Zhao became the first Asian woman to win the Golden Globe for best director for her film *Nomadland* in 2021. The title of one article referred to Beijing-born Ms. Zhao as "China's pride".

However, this changed dramatically when someone dug up a critical comment Zhao had made about China (Qin & Chien, 2021), the praise quickly turned to attacks that were implicitly approved, even encouraged by the authorities through the statement of the academy's State Cultural Security and Ideology Building Centre. Immediately afterward, the censors intervened, and search terms related to this film, such as the title of it and the Chinese name of Zhao, were blocked (Qin & Chien, 2021). Confusingly, the work itself does not contain anything against China, and even its criticism of the United States is welcomed by the Chinese government, nevertheless, China's censorship system is extremely strict on political stances, and neither the creators nor their works are allowed to express dissatisfaction with the Chinese Communist government, and in which many people are consciously directed by the authorities towards nationalism. Chloé Zhao and her film *Nomadland* are just one example of the literary and artistic works that have been blocked under this regime.

The pressures of censorship on the creative space of literature and art are not only reflected in the Chinese government's strict control of the film market but have also penetrated the art community. Unlike mainland China, Hong Kong, which has always been more liberal in all aspects, has also come under the control of National Security Laws nowadays. Overnight, protest signs vanished. Publishers, directors, and curators awaited this moment in horror. Even more, critiques have gone beyond politics to a kind of moral policing, including

condemning depictions of homosexuality or nudity. As Beijing's power has risen, the government sought to restrict funding for works created through a non-pro-communist narrative perspective through National Security Laws. Several artists have ceased pursuing government financing or formal recognition as their long-standing worries have become a greater credible concern (Wang, 2021).

2.2 Stay Silent or Leave Their Territory

> *Expressing oneself is a part of being human. To be deprived of a voice is to be told you are not a participant in society; ultimately it is a denial of humanity* (Ai Weiwei Films, n.d.).

The subheading of this part states the status of artists in China who want to address political issues in their works. Not only are works that directly discuss the historical or current actions of the Chinese Communist government not allowed, but even works that speak out for the difficult existential conditions of women are forbidden. If the above example of *Nomadland* is merely an overreaction by the Chinese Communist government to the work of a creator suspected of having a different political standpoint, then the situation is even direr for the next few artists to be discussed.

The first is Xiang Jing (1968 - present), who is credited with being the first

woman artist to produce naked sculptures (Tate, 2013). One of her most well-known sculptures is Your Body, a piece made of fibreglass and paint that is 270×160×150 cm in size. A large naked woman slumps in a chair and casts blank glances into the distance. In a basic manner, the scar, creases, and plastic touch put to the figure's skin convey the truth of flaws in the feminine form. The artist unintentionally questioned the prevailing morals in Chinese culture at the time this work was created. Since the piece was not accepted into any of the exhibitions, it was eventually displayed in a solo exhibition that Xiang organised herself (Tate, 2013).

Figure 4. *Your Body*, Jing Xiang, 2005

However, the artist claims that the piece is only a means for her to express her ideas rather than an examination of the current state of gender in China (Walsh, 2013). As well as avoiding this problem, she has resisted discussing feminism, refused to be identified as a feminist artist, and even avoided being one of the female artists, despite talking about how the traditional social system has caused or influenced women artists to "disappear" and how it has become a barrier for women artists (Tate, 2013).

Since many women artists have an ambiguous relationship with the idea of feminism and because doing so can have unfavourable consequences in China, Xiang Jing is one of many who have tended to investigate gender issues in a carefully coded manner (Guest, 2020). It is evident from the above texts that the authorities' severe crackdown on sensitive topics has made it difficult for artists to identify or make a clear statement of their motivation for creation, in other words, they have to stay silent on certain topics.

In terms of impact on the individual, Xiang has the right to choose whether or not to confront the government, and this tortuous approach keeps her from being blocked by the authorities; in terms of the artist as a community, when more people make similar choices, it also acquiesces to the deprivation of the social critical function of art by the censorship system.

The second to be introduced is Hung Liu (1948 - 2021), whose works focus on challenging the documentary authority of historical Chinese photographs. It is true that her work is political, but according to her own words, what she really cares about is “the human faces, the human struggle, and the epic journey” (Qin, 2019). Although a direct attack on the government was not her motivation, the sensitivity of the authorities still does not allow such work to existing in mainland China. In 2019, A December exhibition of Liu's works with prominent

social and historical topics in Beijing was cancelled, the situation was particularly tense not only because the government was already unhappy with the criterion of her work, but also because of the anti-government demonstrations taking place in Hong Kong at the time. (Qin, 2019). It was made possible by Liu's decision to move to the United States that she had the space to create and exhibit these works outside of mainland China. If she had been an artist with a residence in China, she might not have had the opportunity to achieve social recognition.

Figure 5. *Strange Fruit: Comfort Women,* Hung Liu, 2001

When the works of women and history are muted, artworks that directly challenge the government and its leaders are in an even worse position. For illustration, both Ai Weiwei (1957 - present) and Badiucao (c. 1986 - present) and their works have been boycotted in China. Even some overseas exhibitions and events have been cancelled due to pressure from the Chinese government, as Badiucao, experienced before. For a decade, his work has been an indictment of the Chinese authorities (Povoledo, 2021), the image below, created on the theme of Chinese surveillance of TikTok, is an instance of this.

Figure 6. *Big Brother Xi Is Watching You via TikTok*, Badiucao, 2022

Ai Weiwei is also an artist who has been so bold as to express his discontent sharply with the Chinese Communist government. The most famous of these photographs is the *Study of Perspective: Tian'anmen* (1997). The middle finger's inanimate items, according to Ai Weiwei, are representations of things that restrict people's ability to express themselves freely and obstruct the propagation of democratic principles. The artist hopes to convey to viewers through these images that individuals should stand up for their own values rather than those developed and propagated by others. The *Study of Perspective* was photographed as a series not only in front of Tiananmen Square but also in other locations such as the White House in Washington, D.C., and yet Ai Weiwei was still arrested for this particular one on Tian'anmen (Sidelnikov, n.d.).

Figure 7. *Study of Perspective: Tian'anmen,* Ai Weiwei, 1997

Censorship has long been a reality in China's cultural sectors, and since Xi Jinping's ascension in 2012, the already limited area for free expression has only shrunk further. Even when the artworks are not blatantly political, it is becoming more and more frequent for single works of art, and even entire shows, to be withdrawn at the request of the Chinese authorities (Povoledo, 2021). This stark indisputable fact also led the three artists mentioned above, and others like them who pursued their freedom of creativity, to leave their home country and settle elsewhere. Today, the mere fact of leaving the land under Chinese jurisdiction is no longer enough to counter this censorship. China's extensive censorship system and economic might are becoming felt outside of its boundaries as well. A clear message was sent when Chinese officials specifically requested that art exhibitions be cancelled, as was the case with Badiucao's exhibition in Brescia (Povoledo, 2021), although it did not work.

From an individual point of view, the above incidents are a restriction on the creative freedom and career of an individual, whereas, from a collective point of view, the suppression of multiple individuals is a blow to the art industry as a whole. And the resistance to this authoritarian control is a process of separating the power of truth from the form of social and cultural hegemony in which it currently resides (Foucault, 1984).

Conclusion

> *I refuse to accept the idea that the state's authority can't be opposed, challenged, or interrogated. In the face of power, I would always be at a disadvantage, I knew, but I was a born contrarian, and there's no other way for me to live except by taking an oppositional stance.* (Ai, 2021)

In the first chapter, the first two parts illustrated how power exploits human rights under its rule, and the third part is examined with examples from recent occurrences in China. The second chapter, with numerous examples, begins with a portrait of the severely repressed space of artistic expression in mainland China and then elucidates the dilemma faced by artists working on the topics of human rights and politics.

As can be observed from these studies, while the Chinese government has made gender equality a fundamental state policy, its patriarchal nature, in combination with its undemocratic nature, together with the clampdown on human rights activism since Xi Jinping came to power, has led to gender inequality presenting itself as a pernicious social event and tending to intensify. Moreover, in a society under the rule of the Chinese Communist government that is extremely intolerant of bold literary creations, artists like Xiang, who avoid sensitive topics and work in a roundabout way, cannot avoid being ostracised by mainstream culture. Artists such as Hung Liu, Badiucao, and Ai

Weiwei, although their artworks are embargoed in mainland China and may not seem to be able to bring these artworks to the audiences that need to see them most, having this creative freedom is in itself a fundamental difference from the former. Nevertheless, this discrepancy does not constitute a sufficient influence on the Chinese government, especially if other polities will also negotiate with the authorities. In this state of affairs, in the foreseeable future, there is no better way for artists to confront the authorities than to create their voices outside the government's jurisdiction in order to influence public thinking.

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