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Whisper Out Loud: Forbidden Topics in China

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Whisper Out Loud

Forbidden Topics in China

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Communications Design

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Abstract

Whisper Out Loud, *Forbidden Topics in China*, is an exhibit of art works based on forbidden topics in China mostly around 2010 and 2011. The exhibited collection consisted of two paintings, three sculptures and two installations. The reflective essay talks about the creation of each piece, the stories and meanings behind them, as well as the inspiration, organization and impact of the show as a whole, including images and documentations of the art works.

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Introduction

Titled **Whisper Out Loud**, *Forbidden Topics in China*, my Capstone Project is an exhibit of art works discussing censorship and freedom of speech in China. It opened on March 23, 2012 at Coyne Gallery in Comstock Art Building, and lasted until April 6, 2012.

Starting at the end of 2010, I have been collecting China's "forbidden topics", things that are not to be openly discussed because of heavily enforced censorship, and creating arts for the ones of greater impact on both international and personal levels. The works selected for the show include two paintings, three sculptures and two installations.

For the Chinese audience, I wanted this show to provide them an opportunity to talk about art as well as political and social issues. For audiences that were not familiar with China or the topics, I expected them to think, search or ask, and by doing so, acknowledge how fortunate they were to enjoy the freedom of speech.

Goddess of Democracy

Topic: Tian'anmen Square protest, 1989

A non-violent protest demanding democracy. Protesters, mainly college students, were

violently cracked down by the army force.

Made of ceramics and purposely broken for the show, the first piece is the ruin of the Goddess of Democracy, a statue created during the Tian'anmen Square Protests of 1989, in Beijing, China. The Protests, also known as the Tian'anmen Square Massacre, or the June 4th Incident, is no doubt at the very top of the list of forbidden topics. It is the biggest open secret of the country's politics, known and experienced by many, but not to be openly discussed in any form of public media.

As a result of Deng Xiaoping's economical reform in the late 1970s, the Chinese economy has been unstable, and corruption within the Communist Party elites grew rapidly. Beginning on April 15, 1989, people peacefully gathered on Tian'anmen Square to mourn the death of former Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who promoted free market and political transparency, as a way of expressing their dissatisfaction with the current leadership. Largely run by college students of Beijing, the protests lasted for seven weeks and won support from the general public. On May 20th, martial law was declared, and on June 4th, troops of the People's Liberation Army were sent in to clear the Square of protesters using live fire. While the exact number of deaths remains unknown, the estimates range from 214 by the Chinese government to 2600 by the Chinese Red Cross.

My first real encounter of the Tian'anmen Square Protests was through the famous image of the "Tank Man", a young man in a white shirt standing in front of a line of

tanks, trying to stop them from proceeding to the Square. The image was made into large posters and sold to students as dorm room decorations at the beginning of every semester.

Seeing the poster reminded me of the opportunity to find out what really happened, since no one talked about it and nothing showed up online when I tried to research it in China. I could not stop once I started searching in the United States. News articles, books, photos and documentaries proved to me in detail a shocking historical event and political turmoil that has been kept away from people within China. I called my parents, who reluctantly told me they were actually part of the movement in our city. I asked my friends, many of them knew of the incident, but no one knows enough and they never talked about it. Some suggested to me not to discuss this over the phone in case of getting into trouble.

In the summer of 2009, I did an internship at a local newspaper in my hometown. As it was getting closer to June 4th, the 20th anniversary of the Protests, editors were frequently called into meetings to make sure everything was handled by the directive that was given to the media by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. My father, who worked for the Communist Party Committee's Office of Publication, worked till very late everyday for two weeks. Nothing showed up in the news, but one could easily feel the tension in the air.

What inspired me to create this piece was the glaze that was applied to the surface of

the sculpture. This white glaze cracks as a result of Raku firing. Thinking about the firing process of taking the object out of the kiln and letting it burn in wood ashes, and the special cracking effect it generates on the glazed surface, I wanted to use it for something that is permanently damaged and scarred. This is reminiscent of the statue of the Goddess of Democracy, made of paper mache, standing on Tian'anmen Square with millions of protesters, directly facing the huge portrait of Mao on top of the entrance to the Forbidden City. The sculpture only stood for five days before it was torn down and broken into pieces during the Massacre. The material worked perfectly for the subject.

By the time I finished all the works for the show and started installing, I strongly felt that just the cracks themselves are not enough to express my disappointment and anger toward the lack of democracy in China, so I broke the sculpture, leaving only her head recognizable.

Grass Mud Horse

Topic: Swear Words, 2009

One of a series of web-invented phrases as substitutions for swear words that are censored from the Internet.

This piece consists of 10 ceramic llamas in different postures, some walking, some pausing, some looking back, some talking and some listening. The forbidden topic of

this piece is swear words.

On the Chinese Internet, the image of a llama represents the phrase "Grass Mud Horse", which in Chinese phonetically equals the expression "mother fucker". There are many more invented phrases and attached imagery like this just to break through Internet censorship.

When and where exactly this play of words started is unknown, but it is known that on March 30, 2009, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued a directive highlighting 31 categories of content prohibited online, including some political and historical issues, violence, pornography and certain swear words. The reason why "llama" was chosen is also unclear, but my guess is that the animal must have seemed odd looking to the Chinese citizens because they were not common in the country.

Since the discovery of the animal and the creation of this word, llamas became iconic in Chinese popular culture, on and beyond the Internet. Videos and cartoons were made and widely spread. Plush doll llamas are especially enjoyed by young adults as prank gifts. Given the cute qualities of the animal and the joking, lighthearted nature of its context, no one really takes it seriously or offensively.

As for their role in the exhibit, the llamas add humor to the collection of topics that are otherwise serious, violent and tragic. However, the bigger story and deeper meaning

behind this piece is ironic, if not pathetic. How sad and unfair is it that, in China, people are not allowed to use swear words that are common in every language and culture and are forced to make up new words or use the image of some innocent animal to express their anger, whether it is toward the slowness of the Internet or the corruption of the government. It is one thing to regulate the use of language by having "beeps" concerning the influence of words on the audience, and another to completely ban the use of certain language, because it is part of people's rights to express themselves in the way they want, or at least it should be.

Google.cn

Topic: Google pulling out of China, 2010

Google refused to sensor searches and pulled out of China. Websites like Facebook and Twitter are banned in China.

A juxtaposition of a Cultural Revolutionary poster and a painting of modern motifs, this image is a play of controversies around China's Internet censorship and Google's ending its service within the country, the third forbidden topic in the show.

In March 2010, Google.Inc, decided to pull out its subsidiary Google.cn out of China and direct all their Chinese searches to Google.hk in Hong Kong, in order to bypass the Chinese regulators and allow the users to have better access to information on Internet. This action as an open resistance to cooperate with the Chinese government

ended google's self-censorship since its founding in China in 2005. As a result, Google withdrew its services from the country and its reasons have become censored in China.

This painting was the first piece completed and selected for the show, created in 2010, even before the proposal of my Capstone Project. It was encouraged by my painting teacher who often asked fundamental questions like what is to be painted today and what can today's painters do to exceed the modern stars and the old masters. I found my answers in controversies of today's world. I painted with questions in mind, debating with myself about my country's culture and politics. Google is breaking through an unreal, green sky into a typical culturally revolutionary celebration of Mao, who represented the ultimate authority of China and who placed on to this country the heaviest censorship during his era. However, today Mao's image has fallen in rank, down to just another pop-culture character; one you can put a Mickey Mouse hat on and laugh at. This is because people are now allowed to study and talk about him as a person instead of as a God. Mao's image is held by a boy and a girl, two characters in my middle school English textbook. This image expresses my understanding of the wrestling between free speech and censorship in my life in China, because I learned English, left China and now am able to look back from a distance and have my own opinion about this right. The Chinese characters in between the boy and girl says "Google committee is good" instead of the poster's original statement, "Revolutionary committee is good," still shown in a culturally revolutionary style. This raises my last doubt: Had Google had seventy-something percentage of market share in China, like

what it has in America and in Europe, instead of as low as twenty percent, would it still pull out from the world's biggest Internet economy?

Empty Chair

Topic: Liu Xiaobo and Nobel Peace Prize, December 2010

Liu Xiaobo is a Chinese human rights activist and writer who was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. He was unable to attend the ceremony because he has been incarcerated since 2008 by the Chinese government.

Essentially a blue chair with its back and seat covered by sharp nails, the sculpture symbolizes the suffering of Mr. Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese social activist and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

Mr. Liu has been incarcerated since 2008 for criticizing Chinese Communist Party's anti-human rights policies and calling for political reforms. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on October 8, 2010, but was denied the right to attend the ceremony or to have a representative to collect the prize, thus leaving the Prize on an empty chair on the stage.

After the announcement of the award, Mr. Liu's name and the news of the award was immediately censored in China. Foreign media coverage was blocked and personal communications was heavily monitored. The image of the empty chair at the ceremony

and the term "empty chair" itself became filtered on the Internet. Intellectuals were arrested for leaving an empty chair at gatherings to honor Mr. Liu Xiaobo.

When I created this piece for Mr. Liu, I wanted my audience to look behind the empty chair of honor and see a hidden chair of torture, and to imagine the pain of sitting on that chair. Because of the award and the international attention generated by the award, Mr. Liu is always going to be an enemy of the Communist China, himself in political prison, his wife under house arrest without charge, his family and close friends under surveillance and not allowed to travel, his information blocked online, and his messages unable to reach his Chinese audience. However, it is because people like Mr. Liu sitting on these kinds of chairs that the general public of China has the hope of sitting on a normal chair without fear of being arrested for having opinions and speaking out.

Jasmines on the Streets

Topic: Jasmine Revolution, February 2011

China's first web-organized non-violent protest in multiple cities, cracked down by the police.

This installation consists of 12 photographs of jasmine graffiti displayed on the wall and one graffiti stencil with instructions displayed on the pedestal. The topic of this piece is an event called the Chinese Jasmine Revolution, or the 2011 Chinese Pro-

democracy Protests, which is China's first web-organized non-violent protest.

Named after the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the Protests in China were organized by anonymous, oversea correspondents on Boxun.com and on Twitter. The initial call was to gather and shout slogans at public places in 12 cities on February 20, 2011, demanding social justice and democratic political reform. From the 20th to the 27th, suggested gathering spots were heavily guarded by the police and protesters and journalists were beaten and arrested. After February 27, the word jasmine was banned from the Internet throughout China and even the sale of jasmine flowers was banned on streets and in markets.

Inspiration of this piece came from my encounter with street art in London. The protests took place in China while I was studying abroad in London and I happened to be researching and writing about the culture of street art at the east end of London. This experience changed my perception of street art from just graffiti to a form of public art that interacts with its audience directly on the streets. It seemed natural for me to start thinking about how I could take advantage of this medium and create something for my capstone project. The answer came with a new forbidden topic.

I couldn't help but imagine graffiti of jasmine flowers blooming on the streets of Chinese cities. What would be more powerful than leaving a permanent mark of the revolution? Immediately, I knew I needed to make a stencil and I wanted the marks to be in the 12 cities where the protests were supposed to happen. The challenge was

how to make it physically happen in China when I was away in the United Kingdom, or later would be in the United States. Very fortunately, I had family and friends in all my target cities. Out of the 31 people I contacted during the following months, 24 of them were willing to and would be able to help, being fully aware of the risk of the action. Later, I eliminated family members, because I did not want my parents to know and be concerned. Moreover, the date of the action was set on February 20, 2012, the anniversary of the original protest, so that there would be less risk for the participants and more time for me to plan and prepare.

At the end of 2011, the design of the stencil was completed and tested out. The stencil is one simple jasmine flower on a 4 inch by 6 inch postcard. Each postcard has a special code that consists of the date of action, area code of my location, area code of the recipient's location and the number of the card. Each recipient was going to cut out the jasmine flower, use the card as a stencil to spray an image of the flower on to the streets of his or her city, then take a picture of the mark and pass back the picture to me through the Internet. The action was to be a reminder and the mark a memorial to the aborted revolution from a year ago. The pictures are displayed in the capstone exhibit.

In January 2012, 20 postcards were sent out to people who had finally confirmed to participate, but only 14 were successfully delivered by February 20, 2012. In the following week, 14 jasmine flower marks were left in the cities of Beijing, Changchun, Changsha, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Harbin, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Tianjin and Wuhan. Over 100 images were sent back to me within the next few days

and 12 of them were selected, printed and mounted for the show by the beginning of March 2012.

Out of all the works in the show, *Jasmines on the Streets* is definitely the piece that took the most effort and time to put together. It deals with a more complicated issue and the approach is more sophisticated, therefore it is harder to communicate with the audience about everything that happened. A video documentary of the actions may be a more effective media for showing the process.

"Why are my eyes always brimming with tears?"

Topic: Ai Weiwei, April 2011

Ai Weiwei is a Chinese contemporary artist and political activist. He was arrested and held for months for criticizing the Chinese government in his art works.

*The porcelain sunflower seeds are reproductions of Ai's installation *Sunflower Seeds*.*

They are purchased from people who worked for the artist on the project in China.

This simple installation of Ai Weiwei's self-portrait crying tears of sunflower seeds is my tribute to Mr. Ai, one of today's most influential Chinese contemporary artists and social activists, who has had a great influence on me.

Internationally renowned, openly criticizing the government in his art works and very active in promoting social and political changes, Ai has been a target of the Chinese

authority for years. He has been captured and beaten several times by the police and his studio was destroyed. But it was not until April 3rd that he was arrested for tax evasion and imprisoned without official charges for over two months. After the arrest, his name was filtered on the Internet and his news blocked.

I learned about Ai's arrest when I was in London, where the artist's latest installation called Sunflower Seeds was on exhibit in Tate Modern museum. It was an overwhelming experience for me to see the ten million hand-crafted porcelain Sunflower Seeds covering the gigantic space of the former power plant. I had been to the show many times yet I went again after his arrest. Staying there for a whole afternoon and observing the audience's reactions to his work and his arrest, I was convinced in the power of art to open people's minds, directing their attention to social issues and making them think, which is exactly what I want to do with my Capstone Project.

The title of this piece is from a poem of Ai's father, Ai Qing, a nationally-renowned patriotic poet, who wrote the famous lines "Why are my eyes always brimming with tears? That's because I love this land deeply." This is how I feel about Ai Weiwei's struggle and his works of art. He is always angry and he curses the Chinese government in all kinds of creative ways. He does not care if he looked like a clown or he is arrested. He cries with his works because he cares about his country and his people.

Cover-up

Topic: Wenzhou train collision, July 2011

A high-speed train crash in Wenzhou killed 40 and injured 192. The government attempted to dispose of the wreckage without a full investigation and to control media coverage on the accident.

The last piece of the show is an oil painting of the aftermath of the train collision that happened in Wenzhou in southern China, on July 23, 2011. Titled "Cover-up," the painting depicts the scene of an authority figure ordering the wreckage to be disposed of, which leads to the last forbidden topic to be included in this collection of works, also the only one I experienced when I was actually in the country.

I remember that night when the news broke out. I just arrived in Beijing by train and the taxi driver told me that two high-speed trains in the south collided, and a lot of people died. The next day the image of the derailed trains hanging on a bridge appeared everywhere and the country was shocked by the severity of the crash. The public was told that the first train stopped due to a lightning strike, and the signal system failed to warn the following train. After 21 hours of rescue, the damaged train carriages were taken down from the bridge, broken into parts and buried on site. Within two days of the accident, all the the evidence was gone and the trains resumed running on the bridge as if nothing ever happened. The victims' families were outraged by the insufficient rescue effort and skeptical about the a burial. Questioned by the public

about the corruption within the Railroad Administration, the authorities sent out official directives to the media, attempting to silence reporting on the cause of the accident and ordering Internet blockage to related links. The directive was leaked by media employees on social media sites and provoked even stronger pressure from the public.

The painting was based on a found news photo of the accident. I had been collecting images of the collision from national media since I realized the possibility of working with this topic for the show. This particular one interested me greatly because of the prominent authority figure standing out on the bridge. That figure is definitely in power because he is standing much higher than everyone and he is wearing a white shirt and black pants while everyone else is dressed in construction workers' uniforms. This is very typical of Chinese politicians, claiming themselves the one in charge. He has both arms on the waist and looks up at the train being lifted with full confidence, as if he is directing the greatest project of human history, while in fact he is directing the cover-up of a terrible accident that just killed 40 people and injured another 192. To add contrast and address the irony of this figure's position, I attached photos of the victims' families onto the windows of the wreckage and blended them into the painting. Crying, screaming and collapsing, these people are trapped alive in a distorted train carriage that is going to be buried. It is killing them to see the evidence of the accident vanish in front of their eyes and the death of their loved ones remain unsolved.

Working on this painting while studying the works of Vincent van Gogh for another

class, I experimented with thick paint application, rapid brush strokes, a complimentary color pallet and a flattened background in the style of van Gogh. The figures and the trains on the bridge were handled abstractly, while the wreckage being lifted was painted with great care and detail, in contrast to everything else. A deep sadness came into my mind when I was finishing the painting in the middle of the night by myself in the studio. The Chinese government would do anything for speed and growth. But what are we speeding for, if our opinion does not make any difference, our language is not allowed, our writers and artists loose freedom for speaking up, and our people die for no reason?

Afterthoughts

At the opening event of the show, American audience members reacted as I expected them to. Many of them came to talk to me, asking about each piece, expressing their surprise at the level of censorship China and addressing their worries about American politics and policies concerning the use of Internet and other media. To my disappointment, not many Chinese audience showed up, and among the ones who came, few of them intended to have conversations with me or with each other.

Reflecting on the organization of the show, I wish I had been more outspoken and done more promotion for it. With the fear of being "too active", or "too political", and get myself into trouble when I go back to China, I avoided public speaking, turned down

interviews and asked visitors not to post picture of the show on the Internet. Only later I regretted doing so because I remembered the point of having this show is to raise awareness and have people think and talk about it, especially for the Chinese audience.

In general, I'm believe my Capstone Project is a meaningful conclusion of my study experience in the United States, especially with the SU Renée Crown University Honors Program, which has enabled me to better understand my own country and empowered me to think critically and work creatively.

Summary

Titled **Whisper Out Loud**, *Forbidden Topics in China*, my Capstone Project is an exhibit of art works discussing censorship and freedom of speech in China. It opened on March 23, 2012 at Coyne Gallery in Comstock Art Building, and lasted until April 6, 2012.

Starting at the end of 2010, I have been collecting China's "forbidden topics", things that are not to be openly discussed because of heavily enforced censorship, and creating arts for the ones of greater impact on both international and personal levels. The works selected for the show include two paintings, three sculptures and two installations.

Goddess of Democracy

Topic: Tian'anmen Square protest, June 1989

Made of ceramics and purposely broken for the show, the first piece is the ruin of the Goddess of Democracy, a statue created during the Tian'anmen Square Protests of 1989, in Beijing, China. The Protests, also known as the Tian'anmen Square

Massacre, or the June 4th Incident, is a *series of non-violent protests demanding social and political change. Protesters, mainly college students, were violently cracked down by the army force with live fire, which makes this event on top of the list of forbidden topics in China.*

Grass Mud Horse

Topic: Swear Words, 2009

This piece consists of 10 ceramic llamas in different postures, some walking, some pausing, some looking back, some talking and some listening. The forbidden topic of this piece is swear words, because on the Chinese Internet, the image of a llama represents the phrase "Grass Mud Horse", which in Chinese phonetically equals the expression "mother fucker". There are many more invented phrases and attached imagery like this just to break through Internet censorship.

Google.cn

Topic: Google pulling out of China, March 2010

A juxtaposition of a Cultural Revolutionary poster that celebrates Mao and a painting of modern motifs like Google, Mickey Mouse and characters in English textbooks , this image is a play of controversies around China's Internet censorship and Google's ending its service within the country.

Empty Chair

Topic: Liu Xiaobo and Nobel Peace Prize, December 2010

Essentially a blue chair with its back and seat covered with sharp nails, the sculpture symbolizes the suffering of Mr. Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese social activist and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who *was unable to attend the ceremony because he has been incarcerated in a political prison since 2008 for criticizing Chinese Communist Party's anti-human rights policies and calling for political reforms.*

Jasmines on the Streets

Topic: Jasmine Revolution, February 2011

This installation consists of 12 photographs of jasmine graffiti displayed on the wall and one graffiti stencil with instructions displayed on the pedestal. The topic of this piece is an event called the Chinese Jasmine Revolution, or the 2011 Chinese Pro-democracy Protests, which is China's first web-organized non-violent protest. After the protests were cracked down by the police, the word jasmine and the actual flower were banned. In the twelve Chinese cities where the protests were supposed to happen, friends helped me to leave permanent marks of Jasmine flowers on the streets.

"Why are my eyes always brimming with tears?"

Topic: Ai Weiwei, April 2011

Ai Weiwei is a Chinese contemporary artist and political activist. He was arrested and held for months for criticizing the Chinese government in his art works. This simple installation of Ai Weiwei's self-portrait crying tears of sunflower seeds is my tribute to Mr. Ai, whose works has had a great influence on me. The porcelain sunflower seeds are reproductions of Ai's installation Sunflower Seeds in Tate Modern in London. They were purchased from people who worked for the artist on the project in China.

Cover-up

Topic: Wenzhou train collision, July 2011

The last piece of the show is an oil painting of the aftermath of the train collision that happened in Wenzhou in southern China, on July 23, 2011. Titled "Cover-up," the painting depicts the scene of an authority figure ordering the wreckage to be disposed before full investigation of the cause of the accident, which leads to the last forbidden topic to be included in this collection of works, also the only one I experienced when I was actually in the country.

Concerning the significance of the show, I wanted to provide my Chinese audience an opportunity to talk about art as well as political and social issues. For audiences that were not familiar with China or the topics, I expected them to think, search or ask, and by doing so, acknowledge how fortunate they were to enjoy the freedom of speech.

Based on the observation of audience's reaction, I believe the show is successful in general, but it could have reached out to more people, especially the Chinese audience, if I had developed better strategies of promotion.